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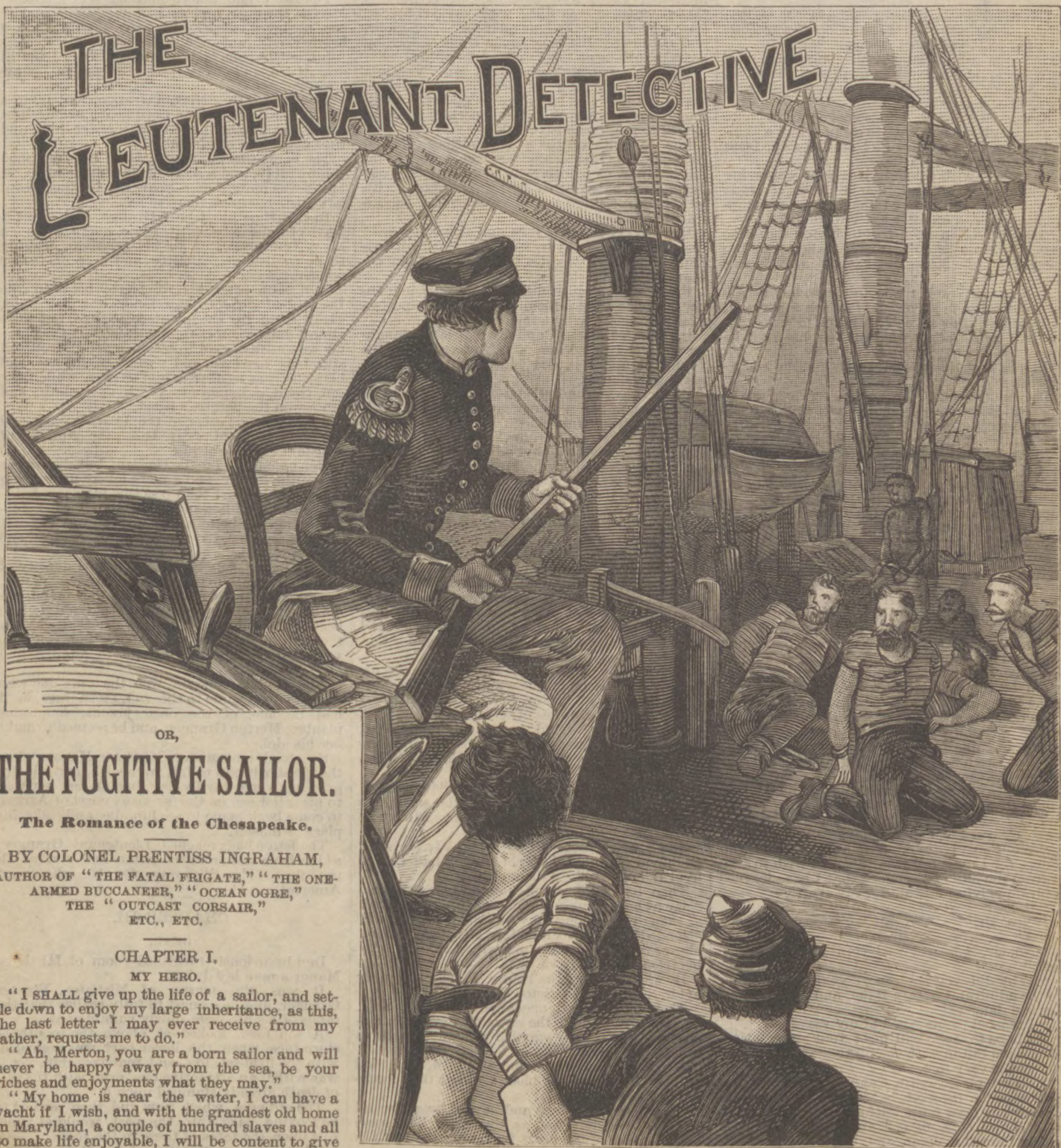
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OR, THE FUGITIVE SAILOR.

The Romance of the Chesapeake.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "THE FATAL FRIGATE," "THE ONE-
ARMED BUCCANEER," "OCEAN OGRE,"
THE "OUTCAST CORSAIR,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MY HERO.

"I SHALL give up the life of a sailor, and settle down to enjoy my large inheritance, as this, the last letter I may ever receive from my father, requests me to do."

"Ah, Merton, you are a born sailor and will never be happy away from the sea, be your riches and enjoyments what they may."

"My home is near the water, I can have a yacht if I wish, and with the grandest old home in Maryland, a couple of hundred slaves and all to make life enjoyable, I will be content to give up my roving career of the past few years."

"Mark my words, Merton Granger, once a

UPON THE QUARTER-DECK, SEATED IN A CHAIR, A MUSKET IN HIS GRASP, SAT MERTON GRANGER, CALM AND SMILING, FOR HE FELT MASTER OF THE SITUATION.

sailor always a sailor, and you will never give up blue water; but what does your father say?"

"He says that his disease thwarts the best medical skill, and that he is dying, he knows not from what cause, but that he cannot last long he is assured."

"He has made his will in my favor, and will leave me a vast fortune, and wishes me to give up my berth in the navy and settle down as master of Mistletoe Manor, marry, and become a country gentleman, as he has been."

"And a fine specimen of the country gentleman he is, too, Merton, as I remember him."

"I shall never forget my visit to Mistletoe Manor, when we were middies together, and how courteously your father treated me, for had I been Admiral Lucas Leroy, instead of a midshipman, he could not have honored me more."

"Yes, father is a type of the old school, courteous to all, believing no gentleman can do a wrong act, and true as steel to his friends."

"I shall resign at once, and only hope that I can reach home before he passes away; but alas! Lucas, it is a long distance from the African Coast to the shores of Chesapeake Bay, and this letter was written nearly three months ago; but I shall hope to see him ere he dies, for he is all that I have to love, as my other kindred I have never felt kindly toward."

"But, Lucas, I shall expect to have you as my guest when next you set foot in dear old America."

"Now I must go and ask permission to visit the flag-ship, tender my resignation and beg leave at once to catch that fleet brig home, for she sails to-morrow."

The speakers were lieutenants in the United States Navy, attached to a sloop-of-war then cruising on the coast of Africa.

One was a Marylander, Merton Granger by name, and his home was upon the shores of Chesapeake Bay, where his ancestors had dwelt for several generations.

A splendid fellow, handsome as an Apollo, brave as a lion, generous to a fault, and a skillful officer, he was the idol of the ship, from quarter-deck to fore-castle.

The other, with whom he had been conversing in the ward-room, had been his boon comrade since the two had entered the navy as midshipmen together, soon after the War of 1812.

They had often been together upon the same vessels, and no shadow had ever fallen upon the friendship of Merton Granger and Lucas Leroy.

Lieutenant Granger was known to be the heir to vast wealth, in slaves and lands in Maryland, and with an allowance of spending money from his indulgent father, quadrupling his pay, he was ever ready to give in charity, lend to a friend, or spend his gold freely for the enjoyment of his mates.

The handsomest man in the service," as he was called, he was also noted as being a thorough sailor and most daring officer, ever ready to volunteer for the most hazardous undertaking.

He had at once determined to obey the request of his dying father, to resign his commission and return home, to become master of Mistletoe Plantation, though he dearly loved the sea; but then he was hopeful that his father might live, and he knew that the cares of the large estate demanded his personal attention.

So to the admiral of the American fleet he went, his resignation was tendered, and under the circumstances approved, and Merton Granger set sail from the African Coast, homeward bound in a swift-sailing brig, whose destination was New York.

When he boarded the pretty craft, his money procured for him the very best accommodations, and many a bottle of wine was cracked in the cabin by the scores of his brother officers who came to see him sail and bid him *bon voyage*.

As the brig sailed out of the harbor, the crews of the war-ships waved him farewell, and the merchant captain said with a smile:

"You seem to be a most popular man, Lieutenant Granger."

"I have always sought the good will of my fellow-men, captain, and it touches me deeply to feel that all are my friends on board yonder vessels," was the modest reply.

"Well, sir, I am glad indeed to have you along, for I must tell you, though I wish to keep it from the other passengers, that I have learned a pirate is lying in wait for my craft."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir."

"An Algerine of course?"

"No, sir, it is said to be an American corsair."

"Why did you not report your information to the admiral, Captain Dana, and get a convoy beyond danger?"

"I trusted to the speed of my vessel, sir."

"I hope that she will meet your expectation, should we fall in with the pirate."

"She is very fast, sir."

"So are pirate craft, Captain Dana; but, we will hope for the best, but should we meet the outlaw craft we must outfoot him, or whip him if it comes to a fight," and Merton Granger coolly lighted a cigar and began to pace the deck with the quiet walk natural to one reared on the quarter-deck of a vessel-of-war.

CHAPTER II.

THE MASTER OF MISTLETOE.

A LARGE, rambling old structure, built of brick before the war of the Revolution, and with wings, gables and turrets innumerable was Mistletoe Manor.

It was situated on the shores of the beautiful Chesapeake, and commanded a view of the bay and coast line for miles, and the miles were nearly all owned by the master of the manor, with slaves by the hundred and all that heart could wish to make home luxurious and add to the happiness of the dwellers in the elegant home.

In earlier days hospitality had been unbounded in Mistletoe Manor, and scores of sable servants had been kept busy waiting upon its numerous guests.

Its baronial-like halls had been thrown open at all times to the country gentry, while the poorest dwellers in the neighborhood also found welcome there.

So were matters when Planter Granger of Mistletoe, as the father of Lieutenant Merton Granger was called, was a young man, and the heir to the estates but a mere boy.

Planter Granger had been an extensive traveler, and having inherited the estate and all the great wealth from his father, as an only child, he had been wont to leave a reliable overseer upon the place while he devoted two-thirds of each year to travel.

It was said that he visited foreign lands, and was as much at home in Paris and London, as in New York or New Orleans; but certain it is that the manor was filled with various *bric-a-brac* picked up in the four quarters of the globe, and visitors to Mistletoe never tired of looking at its luxurious pictures and works of art.

Many a beautiful Maryland and Virginia maiden, the daughter of some rich old aristocratic family, cast longing eyes upon the handsome young planter and his superb home, and longed to reign as mistress there.

But in spite of these temptations, Merton Granger, for Lieutenant Granger bore his father's name, sought a wife elsewhere, and one day caused a sensation by bringing home with him, from a foreign land, it was said, a beautiful young wife.

Her darkly-bronzed face and rich color, with the glorious black eyes, indicated Spanish origin, while there was just the shadow of an accent in her English.

But she was beautiful in face, queenly in manner, and possessed a form that was the perfection of graceful symmetry.

"I married abroad, and my wife is the daughter of a long line of ancestry," was all that the young planter vouchsafed to the curious regarding his bride.

But he gave grand receptions, and the gentry, cavaliers and ladies were compelled to acknowledge the beautiful wife a very queen among women, and she took from the curious the sharp sting of malice which had been engendered against her for marrying Merton Granger.

After a year of happy married life, a child was born to the master of Mistletoe Manor and his lovely bride.

That child was destined to be the heir to Mistletoe and the hero of this romance, he whom the reader met in his twenty-fifth year as Lieutenant Merton Granger.

Two, three years passed away and the youthful heir, handsome as a picture, and resembling both father and mother in a blended likeness that was most striking, was growing apace and promising to be a fit inheritor of the name and wealth of the Grangers.

But one day, while the planter was absent, looking after some business matters in the city of Baltimore, a visitor arrived at Mistletoe Manor and asked to see Mrs. Granger.

The negro butler said that his mistress started violently when she beheld the visitor, and then the two talked together in a low tone for full an hour.

When the planter returned the following day, he seemed appalled to learn of the stranger's visit, and more, to know that his beautiful wife had left his home.

There was a note left by her, the butler said, and upon reading this Mr. Granger had turned livid and reeled like a drunken man.

Then he had ordered horses put to the carriage at once, and, with his trunk well packed, as though for a long stay, he had started off, attended only by his faithful valet, who, having almost raised his young master, as it were, was his friend as well as slave.

It was six months before Planter Granger again set foot in Mistletoe Manor.

Then he returned, accompanied by Hickory, his negro valet, and the servants who gazed upon him were fairly startled at the change in him.

His face was white and haggard, a settled paleness as though the blood had left the countenance forever.

His eyes were sunken and burned brightly and his lips were stern set, as though to keep some deep anguish of the heart from bursting forth in bitter words.

He simply said that his wife was dead, and

more than that, Hickory, when questioned, either did not know, or would not tell.

Mrs. Merton had taken with her the little heir, and the boy returned with his father, as better proof that his mother was dead; but those who were curious, and sought to solve the secret, for secret they vowed there was to the affair, never cared, or dared to ask the planter a second time, regarding the death of his beautiful wife.

A life-size portrait, of the young wife, in all her splendid beauty, was painted and hung up in the "play-room" of the little heir, and thus he had his mother constantly before him, for he had his own suite of rooms with his nurse, and these the planter was never seen to enter.

He passed hours of the day with his little son, but it was in his own room, the library, upon the piazza, or driving about with him, for into the nursery wing he never went.

Thus ten years passed by, little Merton growing into a stout-limbed, handsome boy, fond of athletic exercises, riding, boating, and his books as well.

In his younger years he had a governess, a white-haired woman who seemed to have known misfortune in her day, and she was devoted to the boy; but when he reached the age of ten she went away and a tutor came to instruct Merton in his studies.

At thirteen he entered the Navy of the United States as a middy, and his father lived alone in the superb old house for several years, when he took to live with him his only sister, a sad-faced, lovely woman, with her husband, son, and an adopted daughter.

The sister had married an old schoolmate of Merton Granger, and he had made the match, for he loved his friend more dearly than a brother, and fairly idolized his sister.

But misfortune had overtaken Leslie Dean at every turn, and at last he had become a penny-less man.

Then it was that Merton Granger had invited him to Mistletoe to live, until he could purchase him a small home that would support him, and thus make him comfortable.

The home was purchased, fitted up, furnished comfortably, and a score of slaves put upon it, but it was more than a year before the Deans left Mistletoe to go there to live.

In that time Lieutenant Granger had spent a leave of a few months at home, and had given his warmest welcome to his relatives, begging them to live at Mistletoe and keep his father company.

But, soon after his return to his ship, the Deans had gone to Morelands—the plantation given them by the planter—to live, but were almost daily visitors to Mistletoe; but the planter was always glad to see them, for Mr. Dean still held his love and perfect confidence, and his sister was as dear to him as ever, while their son, Nevil, a handsome youth of twenty, had quite won the planter's heart.

There was one other in the Dean family, and that was the ward of Mr. Dean, the daughter of a distant relative of his.

Her name was Lucille Gazzam, but she was as one of the family, and a more lovely little being never won a heart than was this little maiden.

She had been left an heiress, too, but her fortune could not be touched until she was twenty-one, or married, by the terms of her father's will.

Large eyes, full of passion and intensity of feeling, a mouth expressive of conscious power, irregular features, and yet, with the *tout ensemble* of her face, very lovely, a form budding into beautiful maidenhood, and a voice that was pathetic in its tone, she was, though but fourteen years of age, a child-woman to admire and love.

And Lucille Gazzam was the only one who could bring a smile to the sad, stern face, as it had become, of the once joyous, handsome planter, Merton Granger, and he seemed to make her his idol.

So stood matters at Mistletoe Manor, when the planter began to fail in health, and slowly growing worse day by day, had at last written to his sailor son on the far-away coast of Africa, to come back home to see him die and take his place as master.

The letter had reached Lieutenant Granger, as has been seen, and the latter had started in the fleet brig, Slipaway, for the shores of America.

CHAPTER III.

DEAD.

In a luxuriously furnished room of Mistletoe Manor a man lay dying.

It was the master of Mistletoe, Planter Granger, and he seemed to fully realize that the sands of his life were slowly running out.

A sad face, looked at above the mouth, a stern face when the lower part was regarded, with the firm-set lips and massive chin, yet it was withal an attractive one, even with the seal of death already stamped upon it.

The sad eyes, which now and then seemed to be looking back into the past, would at times rest upon the faces of those in the room.

"I can do nothing, and another whom I might save commands my attention elsewhere,

so I will depart," had said the man of medicine to the watchers.

But low though he had spoken, his words had been caught by the sensitive ear of the dying man, and the master of Mistletoe had said in a firm voice:

"Bid me good-by, doctor, before you go, for I will not last long."

"Send your bill in to Leslie Dean and he will arrange it."

"You have been my friend as well as physician, and I thank you."

"Good-by."

So said the dying man, and the stern-faced doctor left the man with tears in his eyes.

Leslie Dean was Planter Granger's brother-in-law.

He had married Ruth Granger, the only sister of the planter, as has been told, and he had proven himself a devoted nurse, as though to repay all in his power the many kindnesses he had received at the hands of his wife's brother.

He now stood near the bed, gazing out of the window upon the sloping lawn and waters of the Chesapeake and his face showed that he felt deeply the painful situation.

At the head of the bed, quietly wafting a fan was Hickory, the faithful negro body-servant who held in his heart the secret of his master's going after his wife, and her death.

He quietly waved a palmetto fan, while adown his dusky cheeks the tears slowly fell.

He seemed to feel deepest grief, and more, he read that there was a change coming for Mistletoe when the master had gone.

At an open window, her sad face stained with tears, sat Ruth Dean.

The traces of beauty in girlhood yet remained, but still she seemed to move and live as one who did so mechanically, and her eyes at times turned upon her husband oftener than upon her dying brother.

At the other side of the bed, her face buried in a pillow, and one hand grasping that of Merton Granger, was Lucille Gazzam, the ward of Leslie Dean.

A few minutes of silence followed, after the departure of the physician, and then came the rapid clatter of hoofs without.

"My son! my son! he has come in time to see me die!"

"Quick, Dean, tell me if it is Merton," said the dying man, half rising in his eagerness to greet his long-expected son.

Lucille had already sprung to the window, and a look of intense disappointment passed over her face as she saw who it was, while she said:

"No, it is only Nevil."

And Nevil Dean entered the room, booted and spurred, his face flushed, and evidently having some important tidings to communicate.

His quick glance took in the scene, and he knew that the master of Mistletoe yet lived.

"Uncle, I was called from you by tidings received, and which, painful as they are, I must communicate," he said in a low sympathetic voice.

"Well, Nevil, is it of my son that you would speak?" asked Planter Granger.

"Yes, sir."

"I can hear all, and something tells me you bear ill tidings; but nothing can hurt me now."

"Tell me, Nevil, what of my boy?"

"I had a letter this morning from Lawyer Clemmons, who is ill, as you know, asking me to visit him."

"I did so, though regretting to leave you, and he showed me letters he had just received, making known that Merton had left the fleet, after tendering his resignation, and sailed for home."

"Well?" and the voice of the dying man was strangely calm and strong.

"He sailed in the American merchant brig Slipaway, and it was run down and captured by a pirate."

"Well?"

"And, Uncle Granger, on account of the gallant defense made by the officers and crew of the brig, all on board were put to death, excepting one man, who made his escape by springing overboard and reaching the shore."

"He reached a seaport, and returning to the American squadron on the African Coast, reported to the admiral all that had occurred."

A moan came from the lips of Lucille, while Leslie Dean and his wife uttered no word.

As for the dying man, who had listened to this sad story of his son's death, by being cruelly slain by pirates, not a sound escaped his lips, and bending over him an instant, Hickory's voice broke the stillness with the startling words:

"Oh! Lordy have mercy! Master is dead!"

Mrs. Dean walked quickly to his side, and sunk down upon her knees beside the dead body of her brother, while Lucille pressed her lips upon the lifeless hand she held in her own.

"Dead?" said Nevil Dean, in a startled voice.

"Yes; come out of the room, all of you."

"Hickory, watch by the corpse, until I send others to aid you."

It was Leslie Dean who spoke, and his voice was hard and stern, strangely so for a room in which rested the shadow of death.

In obedience his son quickly strode from the room, and rising slowly from her knees Mrs. Dean followed.

But she reeled as she walked, and her husband sprang to her side and supported her.

Then Lucille gave one glance into the face of the dead master of Mistletoe, and she, too, glided from the room, sobbing bitterly.

As she passed through the door Hickory closed it behind her.

Then he sprang toward the bed, unclasped a chain about the neck of his master, and to it hung a key.

This the negro hurriedly placed in the lock of a massive desk and opened it.

After a short search within, he took out of it a bundle of papers and thrust them into his shirt bosom.

The chain was then again clasped about the neck of the dead man, and dropping upon his knees the negro began to pray Heaven to deal kindly with the soul of his master.

As he prayed the door opened, and Leslie Dean entered with several old negroes.

Going to the bedside he bent over and unclasped the chain that held the key, and then said:

"Hickory, I leave all in your hands, to see that your master is prepared for burial."

Then he left the room and the dead master of Mistletoe was alone with his faithful slaves, upon whose faces rested the shadow of grief and anxiety, for they, too, knew that changes must come now to one and all, for Mistletoe Manor was without a master.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHASE.

THE brig Slipaway was certainly a fast craft, as Merton Granger soon discovered, after seeing her glide over the waters.

She was not a large craft, and had only a crew of twenty-five all told, with four small guns that would prove of little use in a sea combat.

Of passengers, there were a score, and they certainly appeared able-bodied enough to fight, or man a ship in a pinch when called upon to do so.

Captain Dana of the Slipaway, was really very glad to have as a passenger, a distinguished young naval officer, upon whom he could rely for advice and aid, if need arose.

He had heard of some of Merton Granger's gallant deeds, and the appearance of the young officer showed that he was one to tie to in trouble.

So he made known to him just what he had heard of the pirate, that was cruising in the waters.

It seems, from rumor, that the outlaw craft had come to the African Coast as a slaver; but having been unfortunate in that barbarous work, as far as her crew were concerned, her captain had turned pirate, preying upon the Spanish Coast, and also along the shores of the Mediterranean.

Incoming vessels had reported being chased by a fleet schooner, from which their being near port alone saved them, and it doubtless had become known to the pirate captain that the richly-freighted brig Slipaway was to sail for America, for he was cruising directly in her course.

The dawn was just breaking, following the night when the Slipaway sailed, when the lookout discovered a sail and hailed the deck with the information.

The captain saw that it was a schooner, which, in the darkness they had run by unseen; but that they were now discovered was evident from the fact that the stranger at once started in chase.

All sail was set upon the brig, and under a ten-knot breeze she went bowling merrily along.

When the sun rose the stranger was seen to be a schooner, very rakish in appearance, and spreading a very large field of canvas.

That she was armed could also be seen, for her guns were run out and her decks were crowded with men.

She stood up well under the large pressure of canvas set, and came along at a pace that showed she was not only holding her own with the brig, but also gaining upon her.

The brig was yet out of range, and still, if the schooner gained a few more hours would bring her under fire.

So Captain Dana pressed on every stitch of canvas that would hold a hatful of wind, and then eagerly watched the result.

And the result was not gratifying, for fast as was the brig, the vessel in chase was faster.

Slowly the schooner gained, and Captain Dana turned to Lieutenant Granger and asked anxiously:

"What is to be done, sir?"

"The schooner gains steadily."

"Yes, sir."

"You feel pretty sure she is a pirate?"

"I do, sir."

"You can muster, with the passengers, some forty-five men?"

"Yes, sir."

"And have four guns, which at close quarters, loaded with grape, might do a great deal of damage."

"The pirate is heavily armed, Lieutenant Granger."

"Granted; but we must take his fire, hold on until he gets close aboard, then give him the contents of your guns, loaded with grape and canister, and try and beat him off with what force you have."

"That his fire may not weaken your crew, I would suggest that you send all but the men needed on deck down below."

"I will do so, sir."

"There is ample time for that, for he will not be in range for several hours, at his present rate of gain, and if you can add to the brig's speed a trifle, we may yet escape him when night comes on, for a stern chase is a long one."

The brig's captain was greatly cheered by this talk with the young officer, and asked him to please take command of the defenders of the vessel and drill them as he deemed best, while he looked to the sailing of the Slipaway.

This Merton Granger did, and after a couple of hours' hard drilling at the guns and with small-arms he had the crew and passengers pretty well disciplined in defending the ship.

It was now after noon, and the schooner had crept up almost within range and was holding on under all sail, as though anxious to get near and cripple the brig before night came on.

The schooner was a large one, and with his glass, when he ascended the rigging and gazed earnestly at her, Lieutenant Granger saw that she was both well armed and manned.

"She has a heavy battery for a craft of her size, and just about double our force in men," he said to Captain Dana as he descended to the deck.

"Then our case is hopeless?"

"Oh, no! never give up your ship while there is a ray of hope, my dear captain."

"I believe we can beat him off if he does not cripple us before he comes to close range," was the hopeful reply.

As the sun approached the horizon, a puff of smoke came from the bows of the schooner, a whirring sound followed, and the man at the brig's wheel fell dead, his head torn from his body.

Before his grasp had fairly left the spokes, Merton Granger seized the wheel, and the brig never lost a point, while the young officer quietly said:

"You see he is in fair range, Captain Dana, so you had better send your men below who are not needed on deck."

This advice was promptly obeyed, the body of the dead helmsman was removed, and the brig held on her way with two men at the wheel, while Merton Granger calmly puffed away at his cigar and watched the schooner through his glass.

As it was seen that the brig was in range, the schooner's commander opened a steady fire, and the iron shot flew about the chase with great rapidity.

Now and then a spar was struck, the bulwarks cut through, and the sails torn, while several men were wounded by splinters, but the brig held swiftly on until night fell upon the sea.

"The Slipaway is not as fast as I believed her to be, sir," said Captain Dana, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, she is; only the schooner is faster than you thought her," was the reply, with a smile, for nothing seemed to disturb the serenity of Lieutenant Granger.

In spite of the darkness the schooner's fire improved, doing more and more damage to the brig, while she seemed to sail even faster, with her sails damp with the dew.

It had been a long chase and a hot one, for during the entire day the schooner had gained only about four miles on the chase; but gain she had, and she was now within easy range.

The schooner had shown no colors during the chase, until less than a mile separated the two vessels, when suddenly she luffed sharp and sent a broadside upon the brig.

"He is a pirate, Captain Dana, for by the light of his guns I saw his black flag," said Merton Granger, unheeding, apparently, the result of the broadside, which had been well aimed and did much damage.

Another broadside followed soon after and the brig's bowsprit was shot away and one of her four guns dismounted.

As the brig broached to, Merton Granger said: "Now, Captain Dana, we must fight, so call your men on deck."

CHAPTER V.

A DUEL FOR LIFE.

"DARE we fight him now, sir, crippled as we are?" asked the brig's captain, as his vessel lay almost helpless upon the waters.

"Certainly, sir, for fight, or surrender without doing so, it will make no difference in the treatment of that pirate to you, while we may beat him off."

"No, no. I feel that we will not; but I'll fight him as long as you say."

"Then fight until I say haul down your colors," was the grim response of Merton Granger, and he at once set to work to repair damages as speedily as possible.

In spite of the fire of the schooner, which showed her commander to be merciless, another bowsprit was rigged, and the brig was gotten under steerage-way once more.

But the schooner was now close aboard, and the guns of the brig were fired and it was the first hit back.

The pirates were evidently surprised, as they had supposed the brig was unarmed, and the damage among them was great.

One of the guns Merton Granger had sighted himself, and he had aimed at the quarter-deck of the schooner, hoping to cut down the pirate leader and his officers.

Ere they could recover from their surprise the brig's guns fired a second time, directly into the crowded fore-castle of the schooner, and the cries that followed showed that many an outlaw had been hard hit.

Cheered by this temporary rebuff the brig's officers and crew gained renewed hope and a hot fight was begun.

But the schooner was not damaged in her rig, as was the Slipaway, and thus held great advantage in maneuvering so that she could sail around her victim, while her heavy guns played sad havoc upon the decks of the merchantman.

"He is running down to board!"

"Stand ready all to repel boarders!"

Above the din of battle the voice of Merton Granger was heard, and the crew of the brig rallied about him, Captain Dana calling out to him to take command.

Another moment as the schooner ran alongside of the brig, grappels were thrown and the pirate horde came flying upon the decks of the slipaway.

They were met by a shot from one of the guns, fired by Merton Granger, and, loaded with grape it cut down a dozen outlaws.

But, ere it could be fired again others leaped upon deck and a hand-to-hand fight was begun.

Merton Granger wielded a cutlass with wondrous skill and strength, and he pressed forward upon the pirates with an impetuosity and daring that won their admiration.

But nearly half of the brig's crew had fallen, killed or wounded, and the pirates had three-score men to pit against them, and by force of numbers beat them back step by step.

Captain Dana fell, from a sword-thrust through his heart, and as the brig's mate also went down, the gallant defenders broke and ran, leaving Merton Granger alone among his foes.

"Spare that man!" shouted a loud voice, and suddenly the young officer was confronted by one who he knew must be the pirate leader.

"You wield a blade so well, sir, I should feel honored if you would cross mine," said the pirate leader to Merton Granger.

"As you please, Sir Pirate," was the ready reply.

"Remember, Brandt the Buccaneer is merciless, but if you prove yourself the better man I spare your life."

"You are generous, Sir Pirate."

"But have at you."

"Yes, here's for life, or death to one of us," replied the man who had called himself Brandt the Buccaneer and he at once attacked Merton Granger with the fiercest impetuosity.

But his attack was met with a coolness that amazed him, and he at once became wary, for the blade that held his own was in the grasp of no ordinary man he at once discovered.

The two men were splendidly matched, as to size and strength, while the pirate certainly was most skillful as a swordsman.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, quick in his movements, and his piercing eyes were lighted up with a passion that caused them to fairly blaze.

His face was smooth-shaven, and he appeared, in his sailor garb, which was an undress uniform such as a naval officer might wear, little like the man who had won the name of Brandt the Buccaneer, a name feared by all sailors who knew how merciless was the one who bore it.

The crew of the brig had fled in fright, back to the quarter-deck, where a few had sprung into the sea, in the panic that had seized upon them, while the others had thrown down their arms and cried for quarter.

As well might they have asked mercy of an enraged tiger, and better had it been if they too had sprung into the sea, for they were cut down ruthlessly while upon their knees pleading for their lives.

This much Merton Granger had seen, as he stood confronting the pirate chief, and more, the rising moon had shown him that the land was but a short distance away, and he was half tempted to spring overboard, and thus attempt to save his life, for he had little confidence in the word of the pirate, to spare him, if he did defeat him.

But he made up his mind to risk it, and so met the attack of the pirate chief with the most perfect coolness.

The pirates, having finished their red work, grouped about their chief to watch the duel for

life, between the daring man and Brandt the Buccaneer.

Having felt the caliber of his adversary, the buccaneer chief became more cautious.

He knew his skill as a blade-wielder, and his great strength and endurance; but he was taught a lesson by receiving a wound on the shoulder that showed him he confronted one who was to be dreaded.

As he tried every point known to him, to disarm his foe, and signally failed, the pirate grew furious and began to lose his temper and fight with almost desperation.

But this did not flurry Merton Granger in the least, for he met every attack quietly, and now and then got in a thrust or blow that well-nigh proved fatal.

At last the moment which the young officer was looking for came, the angry pirate had laid himself open to a chance when Merton Granger could act, and quick as a flash he took advantage of it and Brandt the buccaneer's sword was sent flying into the sea and he stood disarmed, at the mercy of his foe.

CHAPTER VI.

A DUTY TO PERFORM.

BRANDT THE BUCCANEER had more than met his master in the young naval officer.

He had never before found his equal with the sword, and felt that he was making a safe promise in offering to fight Merton Granger a duel for his life.

He had seen the splendid behavior of the young lieutenant in the combat, and admired him, for in spite of his cruel nature he seemed to reverence pluck in a man.

Had he been able to kill Lieutenant Granger he would have done so; but unable to do so, he was disarmed, and at the mercy of one man who stood alone among three-score foes.

But Merton Granger's mind worked with the rapidity of lightning, and he saw a chance to win favor.

Did he kill the pirate he did not doubt but that he would be at once cut down, unless he proclaimed himself chief in his stead, and then the chances were against him.

So he said quickly:

"I have won my life, Sir Pirate, so I give you yours."

Brandt was amazed. He had not a load in his pistol, or when Merton Granger had disarmed him he would have shot him.

He had glanced helplessly at his men, yet dared not command them to kill the officer, as he felt that he would be at once run through the heart by him.

He therefore was surprised and delighted at the mercy shown him, for, merciless to others, he had expected none for himself, and asked quickly:

"Do you mean that you refuse to kill me?"

"Certainly, for I am not one to strike an unarmed man."

"I thank you, sir."

"Your name, please?"

"Merton Granger, a lieutenant in the United States Navy."

"Ah! On board a merchant craft, though?"

"Yes, on my way home to the bedside of a dying parent."

"Well, sir, I am on my way to the shores of America, and will take you there; but you must do duty as an officer upon my vessel, as you killed mine by your fire, until I relieve you."

"All duties pertaining to the management of your vessel, yes; but I will not do one act to aid you in the capture of a prize, or to battle against a cruiser of any nation."

"You are frank at least."

"We had best understand each other, sir, from the first."

"True, and I admire your honesty and bravery."

"Pray get the schooner in trim, while I go on board the brig and see what kind of a prize I have taken."

"A valuable one, and, as you seem inclined to be merciful to me, Captain Brandt, I would ask that my own traps be not disturbed."

"They shall not, be, sir, for I am inclined to serve you, as I owe you my life."

"Yes, I could have rid the sea of Brandt the Buccaneer."

"And been hacked to pieces by his men for so doing."

"True, but that would not have brought Captain Brandt back again as a terror on blue water."

"But I will at once go to work."

"I will present you to my crew."

"No need of it, sir, as I will have no difficulty in making them understand and obey me."

The pirate bowed, and turned away.

He rather liked his prisoner, and was anxious to please him.

He had been born a gentleman, whatever had been the cause of his taking to piracy, and he realized that Merton Granger was no ordinary personage.

His two leading officers had been killed by the fire of the brig, and there was no one in the crew who could take their places, and therefore

he was glad of the assistance of the naval lieutenant.

Repairs were at once begun upon both vessels, the dead men were tossed overboard, as well as those whom the surgeon reported as beyond recovery, for Brandt the Buccaneer was no man to lumber up his ship with dying men, and the slightly wounded were taken below to be cared for.

With only himself and Merton Granger thorough navigating officers, Brandt felt that he was forced to place his prisoner in command of one of the vessels.

Which it should be he for some time considered, and then decided to let the lieutenant command the brig, as it would be safer, while he sent as a prize crew on board of the vessel his picked men whom he could trust.

When all was in readiness to sail he said to the naval officer:

"Lieutenant Granger, I shall place you on board the brig, with a prize crew of fifteen men, and I expect you to keep near the schooner at all times."

"But, should we become separated in a storm, my destination is the coast of Maine, at a harbor to the northward of Seguin Island in the mouth of the Kennebec."

"Once you sight Seguin Island there will be a man with you, who will act as your first officer, who will pilot you to the anchorage; but he is no navigator and out of sight of land is of little service."

"But remember, you are not to lose sight of my schooner, if possible to prevent."

"I understand, sir."

"And let me tell you that any tampering with my crew will be the signal for your death, for they have their orders from me."

"It would hardly be well for them to kill the only one on board who could take them to port," said Merton Granger significantly, and he smiled; but then added:

"Pick your men, Captain Brandt, and with fifteen against one, I think your brig will be safe."

"I intend she shall be, sir, and as an inducement to your faithful service, I promise you to release you as soon as we reach the other shore."

"If you get there first, await my coming, and I will do the same; but do not forget that you are not to lose sight of the schooner if it is possible to prevent it."

"I will obey your instructions, sir," was the response, and soon after Merton Granger went on board of the brig and took command.

The fifteen men who comprised the prize crew he saw were natural devils, all of them, and he did not doubt but that they were ready and willing to execute any orders which their cruel chief may have given them regarding him.

But he called them to their posts, in that decided manner that showed the thorough seaman, told the two who were to act as officers, what their duties were to be, and got the brig under way, following in the wake of the schooner, which was already heading off-shore.

CHAPTER VII.

IN IRONS.

FROM the very outset the men found Merton Granger a decided, but kind commander.

He gave them to eat from the best stores the brig had, allowed them a fair share of grog daily, as was then the custom in the navy, did not overwork them, and led them to think that, as he was to receive his freedom on reaching the American shores, he was only anxious to get the brig there in safety.

They had seen his splendid defense of the Slipaway, and witnessed the duel with their chief, whom he had disarmed, and spared, and they admired him while he commanded their respect in spite of their wild natures.

The morning dawned and found the shores fading from view, while the schooner was but half a mile ahead, sailing merrily along, with the Slipaway following in her wake.

Thus for days the two vessels sailed together, the Slipaway never more than a mile away from the schooner, whose cruel crew and crueler chief kept close watch upon her.

Now and then a distant sail would be sighted and the Sea Satan, as Buccaneer Brandt very appropriately called his vessel, would go in chase.

The brig closely followed, and twice a prize had been overhauled, robbed and set on fire, Merton Granger looking calmly on, but raising no hand to aid the pirate in his red work, just as he told him he would do.

One night, when half across the ocean, a fearful storm arose suddenly.

Lieutenant Granger, as though determined to carry out his compact, and win his freedom when his work should be done, set extra bright lights upon the brig, and doubled the lookout, so that the schooner could be kept in sight.

The pirate chief promptly followed his example, as to the lights, and for a while the two vessels kept in view of each other.

But, as the gale increased in fury, the sea rose higher and higher, and the driving spray completely hid the two vessels from each other.

Merton Granger was standing by the helmsmen, watching the brig with eager eyes, and the

pirates were glad to feel that he was one in whom they had perfect confidence, for, so terrible was the storm that only his skillful handling of the craft saved her from destruction.

In looking to their own safety the schooner was forgotten, and when the morning dawned she was nowhere to be seen.

Instantly Merton Granger called the men about him and told them his orders from the pirate chief, in case the two vessels should become parted, and he at once put the brig on her course for the mouth of the Kennebec.

As the men knew just what Brandt's orders were, they suspected nothing but good faith on the part of their commander and attended to their duties faithfully.

Anxious to reach the rendezvous as soon as possible, Merton Granger spread all sail upon the brig, and she went bowling along at a much more rapid pace than when sailing in company with the schooner.

At last the shores of America were reported by the lieutenant to be not very far off, and that night Seguin Island loomed up ahead.

The wind was very light, and, as the brig neared the coast it died out altogether, and the anchor was let fall.

"I think this calm will last us until sunrise, perhaps longer at this season of the year," said Merton Granger to the two men who acted as officers, and one of them replied:

"Just likely, sir, for sometimes a dead calm hangs on for a couple of days in this latitude, at this season of the year."

"Well, we can run in when the wind does come."

"Yes, sir, for though I hain't no navigator in deep water, I has coasted in these waters and know 'em well, so can run into the secret harbor so soon as we get the wind to take us there."

"I feel sure we are ahead of the schooner."

"Sure, sir, for you have driven her hard on the run over, and Captain Brandt has taken the chance to look up prizes."

"If he didn't go down in that blow," growled the other acting officer.

"No danger o' that, Mate Ben, for the chief's a sailor from his feet up, and he knows just how to handle the schooner, which is as seaworthy a craft as ever floated."

"But if he did go down, Mate Bill?"

"Ah! I hadn't thought o' that."

"But I has, and wondered what was to be done?"

"Simply put me ashore, lads, and go to pirating on your own hook," said Merton Granger, with a smile.

"If we couldn't run a craft across blue water, we couldn't go far pirating," was the surly answer.

"Yes, that is so; but I guess we could hold on to the cap'n here, until he took us to the West Indies, where we could pick up a crew and get a skipper to visit us; what does you say, cap'n?"

"If forced to do so, I would obey your wishes; but as an honorable man, and an officer of the navy, I certainly would not willingly lend you a hand in your evil career," was the reply.

"Well, we'll wait and see what's to be done when we find out that the schooner don't turn up."

"Now, cap'n, what do you say to sarvin' all hands extra grog in honor o' having completed our voyage in safety?"

"Our voyage is not over, lads, until we are safe in port; but I will give you a little treat to-night, as you have worked well in the run across."

"I will have the steward serve you on deck," and Merton Granger entered the cabin after calling to the man who was acting as the brig's cook to follow him.

The crew gave a cheer at the prospect of a feast, and extra grog to wash it down with, and soon after were eating to their hearts' content from the well-supplied larder of the brig, while Merton Granger had them also served with some choice old brandy, in quantities not sufficient to intoxicate.

Then he went into his cabin and slowly paced to and fro, while the vessel rose and fell upon the ground swell, with not a breath of air to fill her sails.

For awhile the crew were quite noisy on deck, in the enjoyment of their feast; but their laughter and rude jests served to rather please than anger the young officer, in spite of the strict naval discipline to which he had been accustomed.

At length the laughter and songs grew less frequent, the sound of voices died away and a silence reigned on deck, broken only by the flapping of the sails and creaking of blocks as the brig rose and sunk on the swell.

Then Merton Granger smiled, and a grim smile it was, as he put on his cap and went on deck.

It was bright starlight, and he could see also by the battle lanterns, which the crew had taken to light up their feast, that the men were all in a recumbent attitude and apparently asleep.

"What ho, lads, are you all sleeping?" he called out.

But not a man answered, not a man moved. Stepping closer to them he bent over each one

and seemed to place his hand upon their pulse. Then he rose and said:

"All fifteen are here, and this is no feigned sleep. Now to carry out the rest of my plot."

So saying he re-entered the cabin and soon returned with his arms holding a heavy weight.

As he deposited it upon the deck there was heard the clanking of chains.

One by one he then bent over the sleepers, and then followed a clicking sound, as an accompaniment to the clanking of irons.

"Now, lads, I have you all in irons and I am master of this ship," said Merton Granger, in a voice that rung with triumph.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT HIS MERCY.

THE sun was just rising when several of the crew showed signs of awaking, by groans and tossing of the arms and legs.

They were scattered about upon the decks, where they had sunk into their deep sleep of total oblivion, and now, as they opened their eyes they gazed about them in a dazed sort of way.

They did not seem at first to understand what had happened, and they looked not only bewildered, but to be suffering.

Their heads were in a confused state and ached severely.

Then, too, their hands and feet were in irons.

One man found his feet ironed together, with a chain that gave him but a step of two feet, while his hands were also secured with little more play.

Another would have one foot and one hand ironed together, and then two would be fastened together with one hand and foot of each secured to the other, while their other limbs were free.

Something remarkable certainly had happened.

But what?

They saw a perfect network of ropes stretching across the deck aft, which no man ironed as they were, could readily pass over, and beyond it, chained to the taffrail, by their feet, but with hands free so that they could reach the wheel, were two of their number, evidently dragged there by the lieutenant, when they were in their deep sleep.

Upon the quarter-deck, seated in a chair, a musket in his grasp, and with a settee, brought from the cabin before him, sat Merton Granger, calm and smiling, for he felt master of the situation.

Upon the settee lay half-a-dozen muskets, twice as many pistols and a cutlass, and they were ready for deadly work.

The sails which the young officer had left up the night before, were beginning to flap in the breeze that was springing up, and the brig was tugging at her anchor, as though anxious to be away.

The men, as they awoke and realized the situation, looked at each other and then at the daring man who was the victor in the game against them which he had so boldly played.

Near them were pans of food, and a small flask of grog, and before these were also provisions in plenty.

They saw that they were entrapped, and they looked at their captor with curious eyes.

"Lads, as you are all awake now, I wish a word with you," said the young officer in his bell-like voice, as his piercing eyes went from face to face.

"You has played us foul, cap'n, and you'll suffer if we has ther chance ter make yer," said Ben, the one who had acted as an officer.

"I have done but my duty, and I hold the power to kill the first man who disobeys me."

"You are a lot of pirates, and I was your prisoner only, though in command of this vessel; but I plotted for my own freedom, arranged to sight Seguin Island in the night, and anchor here; but the calm aided me, and when I did as you wished and gave you a treat, in honor of our arrival, I but carried out my plot to capture you."

"Something of a doctor, I understand drugs, and I drugged the liquor I gave you, well knowing that you would drink deeply."

"Those two men at the wheel are to steer, and the rest of you are to aid in sailing this vessel into port, as best you can, ironed as you are, and the man who disobeys me, or gives trouble, I will kill without mercy."

"There is a drink of grog aplece for you, to brace you up after your being drugged, and food for you, so drink and eat, and then to work!"

"I'll see you at the bottom of the sea first," said the man Bill, the one who had acted as first officer.

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"I do."

"You refuse to obey my orders?"

"I do."

"Beware, for I will kill you!"

"You don't dare."

"My man, I dislike to kill one who is so wholly at my mercy; but I shall not hesitate, as I have determined to take this brig into port. Yes, and to capture your chief and his schooner when he arrives."

"I will not be thwarted, and I order you to go forward and get the anchor up."

In spite of the look in the face of the young officer, which showed that he was not to be trifled with, the man said flatly:

"I refuse, and you can't make us."

Quick as a flash Granger sprang to his feet, his pistol leveled, while he said:

"Then you shall die, for, ironed as you are I shall run this brig into port!"

With the words came the flash of the pistol and the pirate fell back upon the deck, dead, for the bullet had pierced his brain.

The remainder of the pirates uttered howls of rage, and springing to their feet as well as they could seemed about to rush upon the man who defied them.

But, they saw that Merton had well planned, for, with the network of ropes crossing the brig from bulwark to bulwark, and the muskets and pistols upon the settee before him, he could shoot them down ere they could reach him.

"Do your duty, men, and I will spare you; refuse and you die," came in trumpet tones from the young officer.

The pirates felt that they were powerless to act for their own rescue, and they decided to obey.

As a means to this they dashed off the grog, which Granger had thoughtfully provided for them, to drive off the effects of the drugged liquor, and then hobbled forward as best they could.

They hoped that the young officer would follow them, thus giving them a chance to rush upon him, even at the loss of several of their number.

But the lieutenant was not to be caught in any trap, and, musket in hand, ordered the ironed pirates to get up the anchor, and the two chained to the taffrail to take the wheel.

The order was obeyed; the anchor left the bottom slowly, and the brig, under a light breeze, began to glide through the water.

At the wheel stood the two men, their feet chained to the taffrail, and forward were the pirate crew at their posts, though in irons, the mutineers lying dead amidships, and the brig sailing on her course, while Merton Granger, musket in hand, held his place on the quarter-deck, altogether presenting a strange and striking scene, worthy of the pencil of Gustave Dore, who so well depicted Inferno.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LIEUTENANT'S RUSE.

A STRANGE sight indeed it was, to see that brig, with her crew in irons, forced to do duty under the muzzle of the musket held by the plucky naval officer, whose bold plot had won him the vessel again, sailing over the waters and bound for port.

Untiringly did Merton Granger stand at his post, not stepping three paces from the settee on which were his weapons, the power that held the pirates in awe and compelled them to obey his orders.

Scowling were the faces, savage the eyes of the outlaw crew as they obeyed orders, but obey them they did, for that the young officer meant all that he threatened, the dead body of their comrade, which still lay upon the deck proved but too well.

Through the day, with a fair breeze, the brig held on her way.

When hungry, Merton Granger ate of the food which was before him, and the men followed his example, from the pans of provisions he had placed for them.

To the two men chained near the wheel, the lieutenant carried food and water, but, having given all hands one drink of grog, to steady them after their night's debauch, he would allow them no more.

He knew that liquor might make them desperate and force him to kill more of them.

Night fell, but the lanterns had not been forgotten and were lighted, and so placed that the officer still kept the crew in view.

Several hours after nightfall the lights of Portland came in view, and by midnight the anchor was let fall in the harbor.

The pilot, who had boarded the brig out at sea, was sent with a note to the commander of the port, and an hour after a captain appeared on board accompanied by a lieutenant and a dozen soldiers.

Merton Granger met him at the gangway, and in a few words told him what had happened.

The captain was loud in his praise of the naval officer, and said:

"I congratulate you, Lieutenant Granger, upon your most clever capture, and I will relieve you of your unpleasant duty by at once placing an officer and guard on board until a vessel-of-war comes into port to turn the brig over to."

"No, Captain Dearing, I do not care to surrender the brig, but to ask your aid, sir, in a scheme I have on hand."

"The truth is the brig is not a prize, but an American vessel in which I took passage to America."

"She is bound to New York, where her owners are, and to them I wish to deliver her"

just as she is, with a full statement of the facts, and fortunately they have lost nothing more than her skipper, crew and passengers."

"I will be glad to aid you, Lieutenant Granger, in all that you desire me to," said Captain Dearing.

"Well, sir, my plan is to surrender these pirates to you, ship a crew at once to man the brig, and ask you to let me have an officer and some eighty soldiers, for I will return at once to the Kennebec, and a pilot of the coast can readily run me into the secret harbor where I was to await the coming of Brandt the Buccaneer in his schooner, in case we were separated in the run across.

"Having parted company with me, he may run directly for the rendezvous, and if so should be due there very soon, for the schooner is a very fleet craft.

"Should he be there when we return, we will run in by night, and suspecting nothing, we can lay him aboard at his anchorage and capture his vessel.

"Should we be first there, we can thus entrap him so that we will capture him anyway, if you will but let me have the men."

"I will gladly do so, Lieutenant Granger, for it is a bold ruse and I feel that you are the man to carry it out successfully.

"Let me go ashore at once and ask the colonel for the men, and I will beg permission to accompany you under your command."

"I thank you, Captain Dearing, and if we can get our men aboard within two hours we will be able to get to sea by daybreak."

Captain Dearing at once went back to the fort, while he dispatched an officer to a sailors' boarding-house in the town to ship a dozen good seamen to man the brig.

Within two hours four-score soldiers were upon the deck of the Slipaway, and a dozen good seamen were at their posts, awaiting orders from Lieutenant Granger.

The pirates had been sent, ironed as they were, to the fort for safe-keeping, and then the brig got up her anchor and stood out of the harbor with a coast pilot at the helm.

With a good breeze from the south, she held swiftly on along the coast, until soon after nightfall, Seguin Island was in sight.

Merton Granger described to the pilot the exact locality of the secret harbor, which he knew of, but said he had never known a large vessel to enter.

Still, he had run a fishing-smack in there several times, and behind there was depth sufficient for the brig.

Holding on until the channel leading to the harbor was reached, the pilot went ahead in a boat and took soundings, while the brig slowly followed under just sail enough to give her good stowage-way.

Depth enough was found, and the vessel soon ran into a good anchorage, a basin sheltered by overhanging cliffs.

Hidden within this landlocked harbor, the brig lay for several weeks, a lookout on the rocks keeping watch by day and night, ready to signal the approach of the schooner.

Trading vessels passed in and out of the Kennebec, bound to and from Portland, Boston and easterly ports, but the pirate schooner did not appear, and Merton Granger began to fear that perhaps, after all, he had gone down in the storm the night they had parted company, and which parting he had taken good care to bring about by his handling of the brig, and keeping the crew too busy to watch the lights of the Sea Satan.

Then he remembered that Brandt was a man never to let a chance slip to capture a prize, and was doubtless running off his course at any chance of securing one, and that this had delayed him.

At last, one afternoon, just as the sun was on the horizon, a signal came from the lookout on the cliff that a vessel was in sight, and that she was heading directly toward the harbor.

Accompanied by Captain Deering, Merton Granger sprang into a boat and was rowed to the shore.

Ascending the steep path leading to the cliff, his eyes fell upon the strange sail.

"It is the Sea Satan, Brandt's schooner."

"Now we will strike, so let us be all ready for his coming," and the two officers returned on board, and all hands became eager to carry out the bold ruse of the daring sailor to capture Brandt the Buccaneer.

CHAPTER X.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

WITH considerable anxiety all on board the brig awaited the coming of the schooner into the basin.

They were well aware that they could capture the schooner, if they could surprise her, but also knew that if treachery was suspected, the heavy guns of the Sea Satan would quickly make sad havoc on the decks of the Slipaway.

But Merton Granger held no fears, even with his soldier crew.

All was in readiness to slip the cable and set sail in an instant, and the small guns of the brig were loaded to the muzzle with grape to pour into the schooner, which would be unable to get

out of the basin before they could board her, if treachery was suspected by Brandt.

But the ruse seemed so good a one that Merton Granger did not dread suspicion on the part of the Buccaneer.

The men were all crouching on the decks, excepting the dozen seamen of the brig, and thus all waited for the incoming of the Sea Satan.

The night was starlight, and watching the entrance between the cliffs, all beheld the white sails of the schooner shoot into view.

As she did so she began to shorten sail, while waving a lantern, Merton Granger hailed:

"Ahoy! is that Captain Brandt's schooner?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Are you the prize brig?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know your voice, Lieutenant Granger, and am glad to find you here."

"I will anchor near you."

"Ay, ay, sir," responded Granger, and then in a low tone he gave orders to stand ready to obey his slightest command.

The schooner glided slowly across the basin, for the tide was running out, and the wind was ahead and light, broken as it was by the cliffs.

When near the brig they heard the order of Captain Brandt to let fall the anchor and furl sails.

As the heavy iron plunged into the water, the cable of the brig was slipped, the sails let fall, and with wind and tide favorable, she bore down upon the schooner.

So silent was her approach, so busy were the pirates in making all shipshape on board, that she was not noticed until almost upon the schooner.

Then a cry of alarm, at the action of the brig, arose, and instantly followed the order from Merton Granger:

"At the guns, there! Fire!"

The two guns burst forth and sent showers of grape upon the pirate decks, while half a hundred muskets rattled forth into the mass of humanity not a ship's length away.

The discharge of the guns and musketry told terribly upon the pirate crew, and demoralized them, while a moment after the brig came alongside with a heavy shock and Merton Granger led the soldiers upon the decks of the schooner.

Used to deadly scenes, and knowing how much was at stake the pirates rallied under their chief and fought with the desperation of despair.

But the avalanche of humanity from the brig was irresistible, and the pirates were driven forward and many of them leaped into the sea to escape the bayonet charge upon them.

It was a short, sharp fight, and victory fell upon Merton Granger and his men, who soon held the decks of the schooner and captured a number of the pirates, while boats were hastily lowered to pick up those who had sprung overboard.

But there were two things that greatly distressed the victors, and one was that the pirate chief, Brandt, could nowhere be found among the dead or wounded, and thus had either escaped or been drowned.

The other cause of regret was that the gallant leader of the victors, Merton Granger, had fallen severely wounded, while leading the bayonet charge, in the very moment of his triumph.

Borne into the cabin of the brig, Merton Granger at once was placed in the hands of the army surgeon, whom Captain Dearing ordered to look after him at the sacrifice of all others who needed his services.

Then all anxiously awaited the report of the surgeon.

"He has three wounds," he said, "one slight, one severe and the other dangerous."

"To-morrow will tell whether the latter is to prove fatal or not."

Captain Dearing received the report of the surgeon with hopes for the best, and set to work to reap the fruits of the victory.

The pirate prisoners were put in irons, the wounded cared for and the dead buried, while the sailors were set to work repairing the damage done to the schooner's rigging by the shower of grape-shot.

The next day the surgeon reported that Merton Granger must have perfect quiet, until there was a change for the better, so Captain Dearing sent an officer by land to report to the commandant at Portland what had been done, and that he would remain there with his men to guard the two vessels until they could come on to port or a vessel-of-war could be sent to take charge.

As no cruiser was in port the commandant sent word back to Captain Dearing to remain with his men in charge, and that he would send him a crew to man the schooner within a few days.

A score of seamen soon after arrived, under command of an old sea-captain, and Merton Granger being pronounced out of danger by the surgeon, the two vessels set sail for Portland.

After a short stay there, they sailed for New York, Captain Dearing with a guard of soldiers, still accompanying them, and the army officer in command, as Merton Granger was unable to leave the cabin.

Arriving in New York, the brig was turned over to her owners, and the schooner given into

the hands of the naval commandant of the port, as a prize to be sold for the benefit of her captors, Merton Granger giving up his share to be divided among the men, and, as soon as he was able to do so starting for his home on the Chesapeake, his mind full of anxiety about his father from whom no word had reached him since the letter received nearly six months before while on the coast of Africa.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLANTER'S LEGACY.

LET us now return to Mistletoe Manor, and the scenes that followed after the death of the master, Planter Granger.

The news received by Nevil Dean, that the heir, Merton Granger, had started for home and been captured and slain by a pirate on the voyage, had broken the thread of life, so nearly parted, and Planter Granger had died without a word.

To the family burying-ground on the plantation, a pretty spot in a little valley through which ran a crystal stream, the master of Mistletoe was taken and laid to rest.

Leslie Dean had been the mourner, and yet hundreds of those who dwelt for miles around the plantation and had known the sad-faced, stern planter, also attended the funeral to do honor to him after death.

The news that Merton Granger had resigned from the navy, and met his death on his way home to his dying father, caused grief among many, and it was wondered if he really was dead, or would turn up some day, for the reports had been so vague about him, as in those days, with no telegraph and steamships, it was not an easy matter to glean news.

How would the property be disposed of, if Merton was really dead?

That was the question discussed in every household of the neighborhood, the day of the funeral, after the dead man had been laid to rest forever.

And this question was being answered in Mistletoe Manor, whither Leslie Dean and his family, accompanied by Lawyer Clemmons had gone from the little cemetery.

Lawyer Clemmons had been ill of late, but Planter Granger had been a good client, and his friend as well, and he felt it his duty to attend his burial.

Then too he had drawn out the will of the planter and knew that it was to be opened and read as he requested, within three hours after he had been put in the grave.

So to Mistletoe Manor went Lawyer Clemmons with the Deans, and all were call into the large library to attend the reading of the will.

There were sad faces there, and pretty Lucille Gazzam, in her frank way, had said:

"It seems a shame to be looking after the money of poor Uncle Granger, before he is cold in his grave."

Leslie Dean gave her a reproving look, while Lawyer Clemmons, from a business point of view, responded:

"It is done by the urgent request of the departed, my dear."

Then Leslie Dean handed the lawyer the key, the same attached to the gold chain, which he had taken from the neck of the dead planter, and all waited breathlessly while Squire Clemmons opened the massive desk and took out a bundle of papers.

Mrs. Dean sat white-faced, sad and silent, not a tear dimming her fine eyes, while her husband was seated by an open window, gazing out upon the lengthening shadows, as the sun traveled on its westward journey.

Lucille Gazzam had sunk into the planter's large easy-chair, and her face was hidden by her curls and hands, while Nevil Dean was chewing an unlit cigar and leaning against the mantle, his face wearing a strange expression, as of one striving to hide some emotion and illy succeeding in so doing.

The lawyer was at the desk, the papers before him, and when Mr. Dean had told him that all were ready to hear, he began to read the will.

It was not a very lengthy document, had been written some years before, and, excepting a few minor bequests, and giving faithful old Hickory his freedom papers and a thousand dollars, left all the remainder of his estate, of Mistletoe Manor Plantation, its slaves, personal property and investments elsewhere and money in bank to his dearly loved son, Merton Granger.

But there was a codicil to this will of recent date, and that was to the effect that should Merton Granger not live to gain his inheritance, all should go to his, the planter's sister, Ruth Granger Dean, to be at her death, left to her son, Nevil Dean, who should add to his name that of Granger.

But to this there was an exception in that Lucille Gazzam, not by blood ties connected to Merton Granger, but kindred and ward to Leslie Dean, should receive a legacy of fifty thousand dollars in money, when she reached the age of eighteen years, and Leslie Dean was to be her guardian and, with his wife, Ruth, sole executors of the estate, without the giving of

bonds, for such was the confidence which the planter felt in those whom he so dearly loved.

"Oh, no! I don't want his money! dear, good Uncle Granger," cried Lucille, looking up, while the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"But, my dear, he gives you the legacy and it will be all your own," said Lawyer Clemmons.

"I have money enough, and, if I must take it I will spend it for a grand monument in memory of Uncle Granger and Cousin Merton—oh! to think both are gone!" and Lucille burst into a torrent of weeping, which for some time she could not control.

"Not a dollar to me," gritted Nevil Dean, through his teeth.

His father heard the words and said in a low tone:

"You are your mother's heir, my son, and one day will have all."

"That is not now, and she will live to a green old age," was the unfeeling remark, as the youth, pale with anger, left the room.

"There are a few lines here, Mr. Dean, which read:

"Within the upper drawer of my desk is a package of papers to be delivered only into the hands of my son, Merton Granger, when I am dead.

"Should my son die before these papers can be given him, they are to be burned unopened, with seal unbroken, by Lawyer Clemmons, in the presence of those who attend the reading of my will."

Then Lawyer Clemmons went to the drawer referred to, and searched for the papers.

They were not there, and he searched elsewhere.

But no such papers could be found and he turned to Leslie Dean, who said:

"I have never seen such a package of papers, nor do I know what could have become of them."

"You had the key of this desk, Mr. Dean?"

"Yes, and I alone, for I took it from about the neck of Mr. Granger a few moments after his death, and have worn the chain clasped about my neck ever since."

"It is strange; but perhaps we may find them elsewhere."

But a most thorough search of every place where such papers could be, was of no avail, and the lawyer said:

"I guess, after all, he failed to write them, as it was his evident intention to do; but if you should come across such papers, Mr. Dean, you will kindly send me word, that I may carry out the wishes of my friend and client."

"I suppose you will at once remove from your home to Mistletoe Manor?"

"Yes, very soon."

"Oh, no, uncle, don't come here," urged Lucille, who called Leslie Dean uncle, though he was only her cousin.

"Yes, let us remain at our own little home," said Mrs. Dean, earnestly, while she added:

"This place is so full of sad memories now to me."

"Those sad memories will soon fade away, Ruth, when we come here to dwell."

"And you will come?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

"Yes," was the firm response, and Mrs. Dean turned sadly away.

Soon after Lawyer Clemmons took his leave, and the Deans drove back to their little home; but within the week, bag and baggage they returned to the grand old mansion and Mistletoe Manor had another master, an who little dreamed that there yet lived the real owner of the grand estate.

CHAPTER XII.

LIKE AN APPARITION.

"We will not reach an anchorage before sunset, I fear," said Merton Granger, who stood on the deck of a small Chesapeake packet schooner, which was going on her run down the bay.

She was holding rather close inshore, intending to land a passenger.

That passenger was Merton Granger who had taken the little packet at Baltimore for his home, which he had so long lived to reach and met with so many adventures in doing so.

Arriving in New York from Portland, he had hastened on by stage to Washington and there made his report of his capture, and in turn the capture of Brandt the Buccaneer's schooner and retaking of the brig Slipaway.

These vessels had been turned over to the proper officials, as has been said, and the young sailor had been most anxious to reach his home.

Though accepting his resignation, in the interview Merton Granger held with him in Washington, the Secretary of the Navy had urged him to withdraw it and accept promotion for his gallant services.

But Merton deemed that his first duty was to his dying father, and so remained firm in his determination to leave the service, and going to Baltimore just caught the Chesapeake packet schooner which would land him on the estate of Mistletoe.

By a strange coincidence he had met no one who could tell him of his father, and when, just after sunset the little schooner had run into the

Mistletoe Cove, half a mile from the mansion, he was still in ignorance of what had occurred there since he had received the letter calling him home over half a year before.

His baggage was placed in the boat-house on the shore, for there was no one there to receive him, the packet's approach having evidently not been seen by any one at the mansion, and Merton Granger started on his way up to the house.

He knew the path well, for daily in his boyhood had he traveled it, either to bathe in the waters of the cove, or to sail over the Chesapeake.

He hoped that his father was yet alive, though the letter he had received caused him to dread the worst.

Reaching the beautiful grounds about the mansion he crossed them, and still unseen, ascended to the broad piazza, on the wing where was located the library.

Within, through the open window, he beheld four persons.

They were Leslie Dean, his wife, Nevil and Lucille Gazzam.

His father was not there.

And more: both Mrs. Dean and Lucille were clad in black.

This told to him the truth.

His father was dead, and his aunt and her family were keeping Mistletoe Manor open to him.

"My poor, poor father! I have come too late," he said, and he turned away for a moment to control the deep emotions which welled up from his heart, for dearly had he loved his sad-faced, stern parent, his nearest and dearest of kindred.

After a moment he passed into the hallway and strode toward the library door.

Leslie Dean was seated in an easy-chair, reading a paper, and Nevil and Lucille were playing a game of chess, while Mrs. Dean, who had a lovely voice, was idly running her fingers over the strings of a guitar, and singing little snatches of airs from various ballads, as though not caring to sing any one thing through.

Just then his step was heard in the hall, firm and quick.

Leslie Dean started, for certainly it was not the step of Hickory, or any of the servants.

Then a form appeared in the doorway, and the deep voice of Merton Granger said:

"Kinsfolk, good-evening!"

The scene that followed was a startling one, for Mrs. Dean dropped the guitar and seemed to lose all power of speech or motion, while her husband sprung to his feet, deathly white, and an exclamation broke from his lips that indicated his intense amazement.

As for Nevil he rose, pale and excited, looking from the master of Mistletoe to his father.

But Lucille, with a glad cry of joy, upset the chess-board and its contents, and sprung toward the returned sailor while she cried:

"Oh Cousin Mert! you are not dead, after all!"

"Not dead? Was I, too, believed to be dead?" he asked, as he returned the kiss of the pretty girl, and stepped into the room.

"Yes, Merton, my son, you were supposed to be dead; but let me first welcome you, as from the grave, for you come like an apparition upon us all," and Leslie Dean grasped the hand of the sailor, who now advanced toward his aunt, as she arose, silent and pale, while he said:

"My dear Aunt Ruth, I have indeed frightened you all."

"But see, I am no ghost from the spirit land, but Merton Granger himself."

"Ah, Nevil, how are you, cousin?" and he turned to Nevil Dean who now pressed forward to greet him.

Merton Granger saw that his coming had indeed created a strange sensation, and he wished to calm the excitement, evident in all, before he spoke of his father, so assumed a light-hearted manner which he did not feel.

He was himself pale and haggard, from his sufferings, for his wounds yet gave him some pain; but those whom he met seemed to appear in a mood which he was anxious to put aside.

After a few moments, Mrs. Dean hastened away, followed by Lucille, to have supper prepared for him, and Nevil said that he would go and send some one down to the boat-house after Merton's baggage, for he had told them that he had come that way.

Thus Merton Granger and Leslie Dean were alone together, and the former quickly said:

"My father is dead, Uncle Dean?"

"Alas, my son, he is."

"I feared it, after my letter from him over six months ago."

"You must tell me of him."

"He seemed hardly ill, but rather just failing from some cause unknown to us."

"At last he passed away, just after the news came that you had started for home and your vessel had been captured by a pirate and all on board slain."

"That was the last we ever heard of you, and as, you know, your aunt was the heir direct, after you, your father's will left all to us; but we will at once yield up all to you, my dear Merton, and gladly, for we have our little home, which he gave us, you know, and it is worth a

dozen fortunes, even like the Mistletoe, to see you back again."

"You are very good, uncle; but I have come back to remain, having resigned from the navy."

"Had I known that my father was dead, I should not have done so; but I hoped to get here and help him live many years yet."

"But do not be in a hurry about going to your home, for there is ample room here, and I will add gladly to what you have, so as to increase your income, for I will be a very rich man, Uncle Dean."

"Indeed you will, Merton."

"My father left some papers for me did he not?"

"So he said in his will, which you shall see tomorrow; but neither Lawyer Clemmons or myself could find any; but you may be able to do so."

"But come, Ruth calls you out to supper, and we will all join you at table to toast your safe return, and you must tell us your story, for I am most anxious to hear all," and slipping his arm in Merton's, Leslie Dean, without a shadow upon his face to show that he felt any ill-will that the coming of Mistletoe's master had taken from him a vast fortune, led the way out into the supper-room, where old Hickory, with tears in his eyes, gave his young master a warm welcome, and the other house-servants also crowded about him with earnest greetings, for Merton had ever been the ideal of the slaves on his father's estate, and they had deeply mourned that another than a Granger was to rule over them.

CHAPTER XIII.

MASTER AND MAN.

It was long after midnight before Merton Granger and Leslie Dean retired that night.

While at supper Merton had told his story, of his getting his father's urgent letter, his resignation and starting for home upon the merchant brig, Slipaway.

The capture of the brig by Brandt the Buccaneer, and what followed he also made known, and then of his lying wounded for a long time and venturing home as soon as he was able to travel.

By a strange coincidence the papers received the day of Merton's return, contained a notice of his adventures, and yet Leslie Dean had not read them, up to the coming of the sailor into the library of Mistletoe.

From Mr. Dean, Merton heard all about his father's illness and death, and how the property had been left, in case of the direct heir's death.

"I will see, uncle, that you shall not suffer for giving up Mistletoe, and I almost regret taking it back; but then it is the home of those of my name, as you know, and I am rich enough to afford to be generous with you," Merton had said as they parted for the night.

But, contrary to Merton's wishes, Mr. Dean decided to at once remove with his family from Mistletoe Manor, and return to "Valley View," as he had named the pretty little home given him by the elder Granger.

So the next morning the Deans packed up, and the faces of all seemed to show that they were glad to yield up Mistletoe to the real heir.

But they went not empty-handed, for Merton presented his uncle with a handsome check, gave his aunt an elegant silver tea service, and turned over to Nevil the half-dozen fine horses and outfits he had purchased, believing himself the future master of Mistletoe.

To Lucille he had given a splendid saddle-horse, and a mulattress as her especial maid, while many a luxurious piece of furniture and handsome ornament found its way from Mistletoe Manor into the cottage home of Valley View.

It was the day after the departure of the Deans, and Merton Granger was alone in his lordly home.

He was pacing the library in deep thought, for it had been a cruel blow to him to return and find his father dead.

He had also felt keenly that he had resigned his commission, just when a captaincy was tendered him, and somehow he regretted deeply that he would have to settle down to the monotonous life of a planter.

He was young, ambitious, and it would have been time enough to settle down after half a score more years had gone by, and he had become older.

But the die was cast, and he must abide the result.

It had really pained him to oust his kinsfolk out of Mistletoe; but then he was glad to see that they had taken it little to heart, and he meant to make it up to them in many ways.

Years before when he had gone into the navy, his father had said to him:

"My son, some day I have a secret to reveal to you, if you live to man's estate."

"Should I die, I will leave with my will certain papers which will make known that secret to you; but now, I can tell you no more."

And these papers, which his father even in his will referred to as to be given into his hands, could not be found.

Where they were Leslie Dean could not tell, and he told how he had himself taken the key from the dead man's neck.

Nor could Lawyer Clemmons tell aught more, and Merton Granger was forced to believe that after all his father had changed his mind about giving him the papers, or had put them away where no one could find them.

What those papers revealed Merton Granger had no chance of knowing; but rumors had reached him regarding his mother's short life at Mistletoe, and he had hoped that they would have cleared up this mystery, for mystery he felt that there was, connected with her life.

"Master, can I come in, sah?"

Merton turned and beheld old Hickory, standing at the door.

Hickory had been the faithful body-servant of his father before he was born, and before him Mr. Dean, had questioned the old negro regarding his knowledge, if any, of where Planter Granger might have put the papers, which his will stated were to be given to Merton, if alive, and destroyed unopened if the direct heir was dead.

But Hickory had been totally ignorant on all matters pertaining to the papers, and Merton had yielded to the belief with deepest regret, that the mystery he hoped to have revealed must remain as a buried secret to him forever.

"Yes, Hickory, come in, for I wish to ask you again to try and find those papers left by my father for me.

"We will search together for them, now that we have the house to ourselves."

"No need o' looking, master," said Hickory quietly.

"You believe they cannot be found?"

"They hain't been lost, master."

"Not lost?"

"No, sah."

"What do you mean?"

"I have 'em, sah."

Merton Granger made two steps to the side of the negro.

"What do you mean?" he repeated excitedly.

"I just came here, sah, to bring 'em to you."

"Bring them to me?"

"Then you have found them?"

"They have not been lost, master."

"Here they is, sah."

As Hickory spoke he handed forth the package of papers, which he had so quickly taken from their receptacle in the desk, the moment he had been left alone with his dead master.

Merton Granger almost snatched them from the hands of the negro, and gazed at what was written upon the envelope.

The seal was unbroken and bore the impress of his father's signet ring.

The address, in his father's hand, was to him, while there followed the injunction that the package was to be burned to ashes unopened, in case that he, Merton Granger, never lived to receive the papers, as directed.

"Where did you get this package, Hickory?"

"I took it, sah."

"Where from?"

"Old master's desk, sah."

"When?"

"Two minutes after he died, sah."

"Who saw you?"

"No one."

"And you told no one?"

"No, sah."

"Not even Lawyer Clemmons or Uncle Dean?"

"No, sah."

"Why not?"

"I didn't wish 'em to know, master."

"You had some motive for this?"

"Yes, sah."

"What was your motive, Hickory?"

"To give the papers safe into your hands, sah."

"Do you not think they would have reached me in safety, through my uncle's or the lawyer's hands?"

"No, sah."

"Hickory, this is a bold charge you make."

"Well, master, forgive me, sah; but I will tell you the truth."

"Out with it, then."

"I kinder thought Master Dean wouldn't give 'em to you, for I heard him talking with Master Nevil, and he said that he must know what was in that package, for there was a mystery in your father's life which he wanted revealed."

"Master Nevil told him the seals could be broken and put on again with the same address your father had written, for the seal ring would be in their hands to stamp them again."

"So I determined they should not get to look at the papers, Master Merton, and when your father died, I unclasped the key, got the papers out, and put the key around your father's neck once more, sah."

"Then Master Dean came in and took the key, and if he looked for the papers he did not find 'em, and when Lawyer Clemmons, and all, after the funeral, had a hunt for them, they could not be found, sah, for I had 'em."

The negro told his story in a clear, straightforward manner, which showed that his only desire had been to protect his master, and so Merton took his act.

But he said:

"I fear you have misunderstood my uncle and cousin, Hickory."

"Lord forgive me, sah, if I does 'em wrong; but I don't think they is friendly to you."

"What reasons have you, Hickory, for so saying?"

"I can't put my memory, sah, on one reason; but they are not your friends, sah, I feel sure."

"Yet see how pleasantly they gave up this home, where all was theirs, if I did not return to claim it."

"Yes, sah; but somehow I feel they wanted it, sah."

"Perhaps, yet they yielded it to me with the greatest of good will."

Old Hickory shook his head and Merton saw that he was not convinced.

But he thanked the negro for looking to his interest as he had, and then, as Hickory left him alone in the library, he sat down in an easy-chair near the lamp, and broke the seal of the package, which came to him as a message from his dead father.

What the secret was which those papers made known, the next chapter will reveal.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MYSTERY OF MISTLETOE.

It was some time after the departure of the faithful Hickory from the library, before Merton Granger found the courage to open the papers and read them.

He instinctively felt that he was to learn some strange secret, and from some reason he shrunk from it, though why he could not tell, for no stain that he knew of had ever rested upon the name of Granger.

At last he unrolled the package.

There were some old letters, a ring, and several closely-written pages in his father's hand, and evidently of recent writing.

It was dated about a year before, and at the plantation, written without doubt in the library, and in the chair where Merton Granger then sat.

It was as follows, and not a word was there that escaped the young sailor, as he slowly read its contents:

"MY DEAR SON:—

"With the hand of death upon me, and knowing that mortal man cannot escape the destiny of all, I pen you these lines, for I deem it my duty to tell you a secret of my past, a secret which I have kept locked within my heart since before you were born, though one other here is aware of it, and that one is my faithful servant, Hickory."

"If living, when you read these lines, and you would know aught which I may not have written here, ask old Hickory to give you such information as he can."

"Ah! now I understand why Hickory took these papers—he knew their purport, and feared for others to see them, though I do not believe aught of ill against my uncle or cousin."

Resuming, he read:

"You are aware that I ever possessed a spirit of unrest, and this may be from the fact that one from whom we came was a Gypsy queen, for my great-grandfather married one of that roving race."

"He kept his secret, however, and only those of his blood knew it, and her wandering life as a Gypsy doubtless had its effect upon her descendants."

"I wandered about the world, with Hickory as my servant and comrade, and many was the wild adventure we had together."

"I could have married any of the beautiful women about here then, for, as the master of Mistletoe Manor, I was sought after as the best *parti* in the State."

"But I had my own ideas as to an ideal, and it was in Spain that I met the one woman of my life."

"I was traveling through that country on horseback, with Hickory and a guide, when halting for rest beneath a cool shade, I heard voices."

"One was angry and threatening, the other defiant."

"One speaker was a man, the other a woman."

"I heard a thr at to kill, and then a pleading cry for mercy, and so I spurred forward."

"I was just in time, for at a man's feet knelt a woman, and above her he held a knife."

"She was at his mercy, and he meant to kill her, for that I saw at a glance."

"So I fired, and the man fell dead; the woman was saved."

"She turned toward me, and never before had I beheld a face so beautiful."

"She was a Gypsy, and a queen."

"Not an ignorant maiden, with barbaric beauty, but one whose form was perfection, face was the very acme of refinement, and who was educated as few women of that age were in Spain."

"But I need not describe her, for her portrait hangs in your room—*show us your mother!*"

"She turned to me quickly as I dismounted, and told her story, walking about with me as she did so, that the guide and Hickory might not hear her words."

"At first she had addressed me in Spanish, and then, to my surprise, in perfect English, as she saw that I was not a Spaniard."

"She was the queen of a Gypsy tribe, and they had wandered in England, France and Spain, the latter being their favorite land, and thus she had learned the different languages, while her father had had her educated, to render her all that a queen should be."

"The man whom I had slain was the male ruler of the tribe, and she had been expected to become his wife."

"But she loathed the man and had begged not to marry him."

"Gypsy law gave him the power to make her marry him or to kill her, and, enraged at her hatred of him, he grew revengeful and meant to slay her."

"I was just in time; but the result was appalling. I would be hunted down by the Gypsies and slain, and she too would be put to death."

"So she made known to me."

"For myself, I can become a victim, if so it must be, to Gypsy law; but you shall not be, so fly."

"So she had said to me."

"But I was already in love with her, and I told her I would go only if she went with me and became my wife."

"The coast was not far away, and I had been on my way to a small seaport, from whence a vessel was to sail that night for France."

"She yielded to my entreaties, as she saw I was determined not to go without her, leaving her to her cruel fate, and said that she would go."

"Darkness was near at hand, and so Kenal, the Gypsy king, was buried by Hickory and the guide, and Hermione, for such was her name, wrote a few lines and placed them on a stick on the grave."

"She knew that the Gypsies, whose camp was a mile away, would come there to seek her, when she was missed, as it was a favorite retreat with her."

"She told how Kenal had asked her to marry him, and when she refused, had meant to kill her, but had been shot."

"By whom shot she did not say; but she said she would fly to the mountains and never return to the Gypsy camp where their laws would cause her to sacrifice her own life."

"This note was left on the grave, as I have said, and she fled with me."

"I offer no excuse for my act, my son."

"She was the ideal of my heart, and I loved her when we met, for I had loved that ideal since my boyhood."

"We reached the seaport, and a priest married us, and together we boarded the vessel, which sailed for France that night."

"In five months more, after wandering hither and thither, we reached this, my home."

"I had learned each day to love my Gypsy bride more and more, and she seemed also to deeply love me."

"We had no dread of being tracked by the Gypsies, so well had we covered up our tracks in coming here."

"Thus time passed on, and Hermione and I were perfectly happy when you came to bless our union."

"We were proud of you, my son, and you became the idol of our hearts, and Mistletoe Manor had an heir, a future master, over whose birth a mystery hung which I hoped never would be revealed, for if known the Gypsies would have dogged your mother to the death, and that we well knew."

"So the mystery of who my wife was we kept a secret from all, none ever suspecting her of being a Gypsy, once the queen of a roving race."

Here there was a break in the strange letter, and Merton Granger paused and drew a long breath, wondering what there was to follow.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GYPSIES' REVENGE.

THE letter from Merton Granger to his son, telling of the strange scenes in his earlier life, the young sailor resumed reading, after a few moments of thought, and a dread stealing over him that the worst was to tell.

"My son," the letter went on, "you can well understand how happy we were, your mother and I, with you to bless our union, and the belief that we would never again hear of the Gypsy tribe."

"But, one fateful day, I was called by important business to Baltimore, and when I returned I found, to my horror, that your mother was gone."

"Hickory had gone with me, and the negro butler, Adam, told me that a dark-faced gentleman had called, and that when your mother beheld him she had started violently."

"He also told me that she had left a letter for me."

"That letter herein inclose for you to read and it will explain all to you, better than I can."

Merton turned to the letter, one of those that had become stained by time, and saw a small but elegant handwriting, which he knew was penned by his mother's hand nearly twenty-three years before.

It was dated at Mistletoe and was as follows:

"MY HUSBAND:—With a breaking heart I write you these lines to bid you forever farewell."

"Those of my race have proven that they never forgive or forget, for at last, after years have passed, I have been tracked here, to your home to our home."

"Kenal's brother now awaits me, and I must hasten to get ready and go with him, for he places the ban of the Gypsies upon me if I refuse."

"His brother fell by your hand, when you saved me from him, but he is the Gypsy king now, and he demands that I return and become, when one year has gone by, his wife."

"Should I refuse, you will be killed, and our child will have to die, while I will be kept for a lifetime of torture."

"So I yield, and, as our child has Gypsy blood in his veins, so he too is taken, taken to be reared a Gypsy."

"If you follow us, then little Merton will be put to death, you will be assassinated and a life of torment will be mine, so I pray you bear your grief in silence and look upon us as forever dead to you."

"My master commands, and, as a Gypsy I obey."

"Farewell, and Heaven bless you will be ever the prayer of

HERMIONE."

Twice did Merton Granger read this letter, and then his head dropped upon his hands and for a long time he remained in deep thought.

At last he roused himself and with a deep sigh turned to his father's letter again and read:

"Need I tell you, my son, that your mother's letter made me the more determined to follow her and you?"

"It nerved me to rescue her, or to seek a fearful revenge."

"I accordingly sent for my lawyer and made my arrangements for an indefinite stay from home."

"I made my will, got a large sum of money to—

gether and, with Hickory for my only companion, started on the track of the daring man who had come to my home and taken from me your mother and yourself.

"I did not blame my wife, for I knew that she had acted to save my life and yours, for that man would have carried out his terrible threat I well know.

"But had I been at home he would never again have returned to his tribe, you may feel assured.

"It was no easy task to track them, for the man was cunning and covered up his trail well; but I at last found that persons answering to the description of the Gypsy, your mother and yourself, had sailed from Norfolk upon a vessel bound for England.

"I procured the name of the vessel and went to England.

"She arrived two weeks ahead of me, and I then discovered that they had gone to France.

"Thither I went and from there tracked them to Spain.

"By a strange coincidence the Gypsies were again encamped near the spot where I had rescued your mother from Kenal, their king.

"I went to the seaport not far distant, disguised myself as an itinerant minstrel, for you know I sing well and play almost any instrument, and Hickory I made into a juggler, for he, as you are also aware, has a genius for such things which have horrified the slaves upon the estate.

"Then we set out on foot through the country and came to the Gypsy camp.

"They were pleased with my singing and Hickory's tricks, and paid us liberally, while they offered us shelter for the night, which was of course gladly accepted.

"I discovered that your mother was nowhere to be seen, but you, my son, I saw running about under the care of an aged nurse.

"The king, Kenal, for he took his brother's name at his death, I saw, and discerned in him a bold, dangerous man.

"He was possessed of a large fortune, and having traveled about the world from his infancy, spoke half a dozen languages well, and with his dark face and very elegant manners, would readily pass for a Spanish gentleman.

"I feared that your mother had chosen death, rather than become his wife, after one year gone by, and had thus been slain, and to know the truth I wished to get it from the lips of Kenal.

"So I pretended to solve mysteries, and told him I could read his fortune and the fate of all his tribe, if he would sit upon the grave of one of his blood, holding a child in his arms the while and let me look at the veins upon his forehead.

"I told him that the child must be under three years of age, and over two, and not be a full blooded Gypsy, and that he must go alone to the grave with the little boy, allowing no one to approach within half a mile.

"A time was set for the reading of his fortune, and he bade me meet him at the grave of his brother, and then to select a child.

"I selected a score, and then, after learning that they were all full-blooded Gypsies, you were brought forward, and I told him to bring you.

"Then I sent Hickory to the post, to charter a vessel at any price, and have it ready to sail when I should come.

"Appointing that evening at sunset for him to meet me at the grave, I departed from the camp.

"He was there punctual to the minute, and Hickory had already come to tell me that the vessel was ready to sail when I arrived.

"Kenal had brought you with him, and I placed him upon the grave, handing you to Hickory to hold.

"Then I handed a pistol to the Gypsy and told him that I meant to kill him, when Hickory should give the word, for he had stolen from me my wife and child.

"He seemed startled, but yet did not flinch, for he knew his deadly aim but he was well aware how cleverly he had been trapped.

"I asked him where your mother was, and, as I had feared, he told me that she had refused to become his wife, and, by Gypsy law, had been condemned to death, and so had been slain.

"I was perfectly calm, though my whole soul craved vengeance against him.

"He stood, pistol in hand, awaiting the word to fire, and when Hickory gave it our pistols flashed together.

"You have often asked me what made the wound upon my forehead.

"His bullet did so; but my bullet pierced his brain, while his glanced upon my skull, stunning me for a while and causing Hickory to believe me dead.

"I recovered after a while, and leaving his body upon his brother's grave, we fled, Hickory bearing you in his arms, and I, dazed and suffering, staggering along.

"We reached the town, went on board the little vessel and set sail, and during the voyage to England I was desperately ill, and raving in delirium.

"But Hickory cared for me night and day, and at last I recovered, and we took passage upon a vessel bound for New York, and after an absence of half a year I was again at home.

"My loved wife, your mother, lay in her grave in a foreign land, slain by the cruel law of her people; but you, my son, I had with me, and I tried to be happy in your love.

"Noble Hickory has been my friend, and will be yours, and in my will I give him his freedom and a certain sum in gold; but never part with him, for he is true as steel to you, as he has been to me.

"I give you herein a number of papers regarding the Gypsies and their laws, which belonged to your mother; but I beg of you, for your own sake and safety, keep the secret that you are one of that hated race.

"Remember, years may pass, but a Gypsy never forgives or forgets, and will visit the sins of the fathers upon the children.

"In my will you will find that you are my heir to all, excepting a few legacies.

"Why, in my prime and strength, I am thus cut off with some disease that baffles medical skill, I do not know; but I feel that death beckons me, and with my blessing upon you, I bid you farewell.

"Your father,

"MERTON GRANGER,
"Of Mistletoe Manor."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ASSASSIN.

THE return of the real master of Mistletoe was an event in the neighborhood which created considerable excitement.

As the supposed heir, Mr. Leslie Dean had been much sought after, as was also his family, for, of course though his wife was the real owner he was the one who had the credit.

But when Merton Granger returned, after having been regarded as dead, he became the lion at once, and the Deans were snubbed, and many spoke of what airs they had put on the short time that they had been at Mistletoe.

Going back to their cottage home, they were almost ignored, while all vied with each other to do honor to the hero, Merton Granger.

But the young master of Mistletoe did not encourage social visits.

He mourned deeply for his father, and all that he knew of his mother's sad end pained him to the inmost heart.

He wished to be left alone in his home, at least for awhile, and so refused himself to all visitors, excepting the Deans.

This the neighbors did not like, and soon they began to say ugly things about the man they had wished to bow down to as a hero and golden idol.

They said that after all he had been left Mistletoe only in name, as it had heavy mortgages upon it, caused by his wild and spendthrift course in the navy.

It was said that he had gambled away his fortune in European ports, and, in fact, his reckless dissipation had caused his father to die of a broken heart.

As he would not let them worship him, the people determined to crush him, it seemed, and soon no one called at Mistletoe.

Of course all this went to Merton's ears through the Deans; but then he seemed not to care what was said, and lived on in the even tenor of his way, dining at Valley View once a week, and having the family to dinner with him every Sunday.

One afternoon Merton had ridden over to the town, distant a dozen miles from Mistletoe, and upon his return overtook an old gentleman who had been a warm friend of his father's, and who was known to be enormously rich.

He was a bachelor, Roderick Duval by name, and lived alone in his old mansion, which had not been repaired for a score of years and was degenerating from a once lordly home into an old rookery.

"Ah, Merton, my boy, I am glad to see you home again.

"Would have called, but since your father's death go nowhere, except to town, and he was the only one I visited you know," said the old man, offering his hand, which Merton grasped cordially, for he had always liked the old man.

"I have intended calling upon you, Mr. Duval, but have had much to do since my return, sir."

"I know, and had the blues too, for where you expected a fortune, you get it only in name, my boy."

"I do not understand you, sir."

"Why you have gambled away your inheritance, I hear."

"Mr. Duval, this is an infamous falsehood, for I never gambled in my life."

"The deuce you say! Well, I heard that you had become most dissipated in the navy, and gambled heavily, and it was that which had really been the death of your father."

"This is cruel, Mr. Duval, for I am not dissipated, nor a gambler, and I have my fortune intact, and it is a large one."

"I am delighted to hear this of you, my boy, for I have always liked you, and felt that you would make a man."

"But how glad am I that you overtook me, for I sold the river plantation to-day, with twenty slaves on it, and for cash, and I have the cash here in my saddle-bags, thirty thousand dollars all told, so I was fearful of being robbed."

"I will ride as far as your plantation gate with you, Mr. Duval, and then you will be safe; but that is a large sum of money to risk carrying."

"Yes, but no one knows I have it, only you, and I'll be safe when I reach the ford, if you will go that far with me."

"With pleasure, sir, and home if you like."

"No, the ford will be far enough, my son; but come over soon, Merton, to see me, for do you know, as I have no near kin, and have never forgotten that I owe my fortune to your father's aid, thirty years ago, I have made my will in your favor and left you all."

"Oh Mr. Duval! why have you done this, for there are so many who need aid, while I have plenty for myself and to spare."

"The will is made, my son, and I meant to send over and tell you to come and see me about it."

"I wished to say to you that I would square up your debts and set you on your feet again if you would pledge me your word never to gamble again."

"It is most kind of you, Mr. Duval, but I never gamble, as I told you."

"Well, whether you do, or not, I will give you all the money you want, and you are my heir and the will's made and executed."

"The truth is, my boy, your father's death impressed me greatly, and I am along in years."

"Yes, I have lived my allotted span, three-score years and ten, for I will be seventy very soon, so it is well for me to have my house in readiness to leave it."

"I shall leave you a fortune, Merton, which has not its match in the State, and that is saying a great deal; but then all that I have touched has turned to gold in my hands."

In vain was it that Merton urged the old planter to leave to some other, some one in need, the fortune which he had willed to him.

Roderick Duval, upon their reaching the ford, said:

"Now, Merton, you can leave me, for you have ridden a couple of miles out of your way; but ride over and see me soon, and we'll talk the matter of my will over, for if you really wish it, I think there is one other upon whom I can bestow my riches, though I would rather all should go to you."

"Still, I will change my will in favor of another, and as my life may drop out at any moment now, I'll do it to-morrow, so as to show you who will be my heir when you come over."

"Good-night, Merton."

"Good-night, Mr. Duval," and the two parted at the ford.

It was very dark just there in the timber; but the old planter knew the plantation path well, and continued on his way, while Merton turned back.

Roderick Duval had gone but a short distance when he heard hoof-falls behind him.

Instantly he turned, and seeing the horseman in the starlight, called out:

"Ho, Merton, have you concluded to ride on and spend the night at The Willows with me?"

The response came:

"Your money or your life, old man!"

Then came a shot and the old man uttered a cry of pain.

But he was brave as a lion, and drawing a pistol, fired, just as a second shot came at him.

His shot flew wild, but with a groan, the old planter dropped his pistol from his hand, while he fell from his saddle and lay motionless.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DYING MAN'S CHARGE.

ALONG the plantation road two negroes were driving along in a wagon, some half-hour after the tragedy enacted at the ford, when Planter Roderick Duval had been shot down by an assassin.

The negroes were returning from a village, where they had carried some marketing for their master, and were singing together a plantation song.

But a groan suddenly broke on their ears, followed by a low call, and the wagon came to a quick halt.

The scene was a dreary one, and it was avoided by the negroes from the fact that a runaway slave had once attacked an overseer there and killed him, but was also slain by his victim, and their two graves were near by on the side of the road.

The negroes all avoided the spot, even by day, and the two in the wagon, detained in town until after night, were singing to keep their courage up as they passed the dread spot.

"Help me, boys, help me! I am your master, and wounded," said a voice aloud.

The two negroes recognized the voice and sprung from the wagon.

There lay their master, Roderick Duval, while his horse was grazing near him.

Seeing their kind master, for he had been ever good to his slaves, in such suffering, the two negroes forgot all about the gloomy spot and hastily, though gently, raised him in their arms and placed him in the market-wagon.

They believed that he had been thrown from his horse, so asked no questions, and drove home as fast as the nature of the road would permit.

"Tom, go at once for the doctor, and you, George, ride to town with all dispatch and ask my lawyer to come here, and to bring with him the squire."

So had said the wounded man, and while the house-servants carried their master into the old mansion and laid him upon his bed, the two negroes who had brought him home mounted horses and rode away at full speed to obey the orders given them.

The time dragged slowly by to the suffering man, who became nervous, fearing that he would die ere help came to him.

But at last the doctor arrived and quickly examined his wounds.

"Will I live?" sharply asked Roderick Duval.

"I am afraid your wounds are fatal, Mr. Duval, for you have two," was the answer.

"How long have I to live?" was the next query.

"Perhaps you may recover, and maybe you may die by dawn."

"I must live to see the lawyer and the squire,

for I am revengeful, and will strike with my dying words," said the old planter, fiercely.

"Who wounded you thus, Mr. Duval?" asked the doctor.

"There is no danger of my dying suddenly, within the next few hours?"

"No."

"Then wait until the others come," was the answer.

The others, the country squire and the attorney of Roderick Duval, soon after arrived, and the doctor, at the request of the wounded man, made another examination of the wounds and gave his opinion as to the result.

"You hear what he says, gentlemen?" asked the planter, with a strong voice, which was not expected of him under the circumstances.

The squire and attorney bowed.

"Now I am an old man, ready to die, having lived my years through; but I am not willing to let my slayer go unpunished, and I wish to make my ante-mortem statement under oath; so be ready, squire, to take down all that I say, and you, Lawyer Earl, draw up my will anew."

"You intend changing it, sir?" asked the lawyer.

"I do," was the firm reply.

"Now for my statement, and I make it under oath, feeling that the hand of death is upon me."

"I wish to state that, years ago, when a young man, I met one who befriended me and gave me a start in life, and to his goodness I owe the fortune I now have, for it was all builded upon his generous gift to me."

"That man was Merton Granger, now dead, and realizing all that I owed to him, and having no kindred whom I know, I made my will in favor of his son, Merton Granger, Jr."

"That will I now revoke, and I wish you, Mr. Earl, to draw up another, leaving as my heiress Lucille Gazzam, the ward of Leslie Dean."

"Once while in the timber one day I was taken ill and fell from my horse."

"She was riding by, saw me, did all she could to help me, and would not leave me, though night was coming on."

"At last I grew better, was able to mount my horse and she rode home with me, and then dashed off alone to her own home, as soon as my servants took me into the house."

"She is but a girl in years, but proved herself to be a noble little woman, brave and generous, and to her I leave all of my fortune, excepting certain legacies of a minor kind to a few persons whom I will name."

"Have you drawn up the will, Mr. Earl?"

"Yes, sir, as you have directed," answered the lawyer.

"Let me sign it."

This was done, the name being written boldly.

"Now witness it, squire, you and Doctor Hunter."

Their names were attached as witnesses.

"Now bring me a candle."

A slave obeyed and the former will was held by Roderick Duval in the flame until it became ashes.

"Now, Squire Loring, I will my statement to you, under oath, and knowing that I am a dying man, so take your pen, and you, Mr. Earl and Doctor Hunter, witness what I say, and take oath to its being the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

But for the firm voice and clear eyes of the old planter, all present would have believed his mind to be wandering.

But there was no sign to show this, and the squire being ready, quill in hand, said:

"I am ready, Mr. Duval."

In a voice that was strangely firm, Roderick Duval began his deposition, which was about as follows:

"I sold to-day, for thirty-five thousand dollars in cash, my river plantation with the score of slaves upon it."

"I had the money in my saddle-bags and started for home, anxious, because I saw that night would overtake me."

"To my delight a neighbor came up, and I told him how glad I was of company, and made known to him why."

"It was Merton Granger, late lieutenant in the United States Navy."

"I spoke to him of my friendship for his father, who had befriended me financially, when I was a young man, a professor where he was a student."

"I got into trouble then, through my high temper, struck a student and the blow proved fatal."

"Then it was that young Granger came to me, told me that the youth was dead and gave me money to fly, and a large sum it was, for he felt assured that I had not intended to kill the student."

"I fled, sought another scene, invested the money he gave me, and my fortune in life was made."

"Years after I came here and bought this plantation, and renewed my friendship for Merton Granger, and he ever kept my secret."

"With this in my heart I sought to refund the sum, and, as Lawyer Earl well knows, drew up my will in favor of Merton Granger, junior."

"I told this to the young man as we rode

along, told him of the money I had with me, and spoke to him about the rumors of his wild life of dissipation and gambling."

"I further told him, meaning it half in joke, that I meant to change my will, as he denied that he had squandered his fortune, and told me he had plenty, and thus we rode on to the ford, near which is the eastern gateway leading into my plantation."

"He had come thus far with me out of his way, as an escort, and telling him to come over on the morrow and I would change my will, we parted."

"I stopped at the ford, watered my horse, and rode on a short distance when I heard hoof-beats behind me."

"I was in an open space, and by the starlight I saw a horseman coming at a gallop."

"I drew rein and turned toward him when he called out:

"Your money or your life, old man!"

"As he spoke the words he fired, and I was wounded, here in my right shoulder."

"I also fired, but without effect, and his second shot struck me over the heart."

"I dropped my pistol and fell to the ground, conscious, but seemingly paralyzed."

"He rode up, supposing me dead, caught my horse, which never left me, took the saddle-bags containing my money, and mounting, rode away at a run."

"Some time passed, and then my servants, Tom and George, came along and found me, as you know."

"And who do you say was your assassin, Mr. Duval?" asked Squire Loring, while all breathlessly awaited the answer.

"I charge Merton Granger with being my murderer!" came the startling response.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SEALED LIPS.

A LOUD knock at the door startled Merton Granger as he sat in his library, buried in deep thought.

He had returned home from a long ride, but did not seem hungry, so had left untasted the tempting supper which had been set out for him.

"He may eat it later," the negro butler had said, and so he left a light burning in the dining-room, while he obeyed his master's injunction and went to bed.

Somehow the master of Mistletoe seemed out of sorts that night.

He cared not to read, so sat down by the table and for a long time was lost in meditation.

"How strange that my father should owe this large debt and leave no word regarding it," he said.

"In his will he said that his debts as known, were to be promptly paid, and all this was done by Uncle Leslie when he believed that I was dead and the estate went to Aunt Ruth."

"But the letter I received yesterday says that the money was advanced to my father, for a certain purchase, and he gave his note for it, with interest, in three years, and unless it is at once paid, the attorney states, he will take prompt legal measures to collect it."

"I do not like this style of letter, nor do I care to have a lawsuit, so I will write my attorney in Baltimore, telling him to look into the matter and that I will bring to him the money if it must be paid, which is nearly thirty thousand dollars."

"I will write the letter at once and have it sent to the post early in the morning."

Seating himself at his desk he began his letter, and had just written the words:

"I will bring you thirty thousand dollars next week, to save all trouble in a matter that just now is worrying me, and which I will explain as well as I can—"

Here came the loud knock at the door.

"Who could be the visitor at that time of night, he wondered."

But he arose and went to the door, lamp in hand.

He started back as Squire Loring and two country constables stepped into the hallway, and the former said:

"Mr. Granger, you are a prisoner."

"Resist and you are a dead man."

"Having done nothing to be arrested for, gentlemen, I have no desire to resist; but trust you will at once explain what this outrage means," was the cool reply, though Merton Granger's eyes flashed angrily.

"You shall soon know, sir, why you are arrested."

"Read him the warrant, constable," said the squire.

"Pray come in and be seated, gentlemen, and let us talk this matter over," and Merton led the way into the library.

The squire dropped into the chair at the desk, and he smiled as his eyes fell upon the unfinished letter; but it was a grim, meaning smile.

The constables took seats near the master of Mistletoe, who coolly asked:

"Now your charge, officer?"

"Murder."

"Ha! and who have I murdered?"

"Planter Roderick Duval."

"By Heaven! who dares accuse me of this?"

and Merton sprung to his feet with an expression upon his face which fairly frightened those present.

"Mr. Duval makes the charge, sir, with his dying lips."

"Good God! I parted with him just after sunset, at the ford, near his house, whither I rode with him as an escort, for he had a large sum of money with him."

"True, sir, and he accuses you of returning, shooting him twice, and robbing him."

"Is he dead?" gasped Merton.

"No, but dying, when we left him at eleven o'clock."

"It is now one, so come at once with me to his home, for I would face him and see if he so accuses me."

"Come, I say!"

"His charge is made under oath, Mr. Granger, and will stand; but we will accompany you to his bedside," said the squire.

The party at once arose, the squire taking the unfinished letter, in which he saw a clew to the guilt of the accused, and they went direct to The Willows, the home of Roderick Duval, which was but three miles from Mistletoe Manor.

The doctor met them at the door and Merton Granger eagerly asked:

"Is he yet alive, Doctor Hunter?"

"He died a moment ago."

"My God! And did he not retract his charge against me?"

"No, Mr. Granger, I regret to say that he accused you to the last, for his words were in a whisper:

"I loved his father; but the son is my murderer and must hang for it."

Merton Granger's head bent low and a moment he stood the very picture of despair.

Then he said, as he drew himself up proudly:

"Circumstantial evidence has hanged many an innocent man, gentlemen, and it seems that I will also be a victim to it."

"I am at your service, officer."

He held forth his hands, shudderingly at first, then firmly, and the constable clasped the irons upon his wrists.

"Let him view the corpse," whispered the squire, who seemed to think that test a good one, and wished to see how a man would behave before the dead body of his victim."

He was at once led into the room, where the old servants had assembled to take charge of their master's remains.

Two old women were wailing bitterly, and a negro man was chanting in a low voice some negro words over the dead.

Walking straight up to the bed, Merton Granger looked down upon the dead man without the quiver of a muscle.

Then he said:

"Ah, my poor old friend, your lips are sealed forever now; but their utterances may lead me to the gallows."

"Let us go, officer."

He was led away, while the squire said to the doctor:

"The charge of a dying man stands against him; but somehow I do not believe such a man can be guilty of so foul a crime."

"If so, magnificent manhood belies itself," returned Doctor Hunter, and they followed Merton Granger out to the carriage which was to bear him away to the county jail.

CHAPTER XIX.

GUILTY.

THE whole neighborhood was startled, when it became known that Merton Granger was in the county jail, accused of robbing and murdering old Planter Roderick Duval.

They could not understand it; but at once busy tongues were set going with stories of how they knew that Merton Granger would come to a bad end.

There was one at Mistletoe Manor; he had his room in the mansion, and that was old Hickory.

He had heard a carriage drive up, voices under his window and then came the knock on the door and what had been said reached his ears.

When his master had been carried off by the officers, Hickory entered the library and made a complete search, and there were some things which he deemed it best to put out of the way, where the keen-eyed men of the law could not find them.

The next day a thorough search of the premises had been made, but no money was found, but a fisherman had drawn up, caught on his hook, the missing saddle-bags of the old dead planter.

They had been weighted with a couple of stones and thrown into a pool.

The pool was in a brook, upon the Mistletoe estate, and not far from the path which the tracks showed Merton Granger had taken on his way home, so this was proof positive to many minds, even should Planter Duval be mistaken in the darkness as to who had been his murderer.

But the money could not be found, and this many regretted.

Leslie Dean and his family were shocked at the charge made against their kinsman, and roundly denounced it as utterly false, while

they drove to the jail and did all in their power for the comfort of the prisoner.

As court was sitting then, Merton Granger was soon arraigned before a jury of his peers and a judge who was supposed to be the dispenser of justice.

The prisoner was perfectly calm, as he faced the crowded court-room and listened quietly to the selection of a jury.

He had secured as his lawyer his father's attorney, Mr. Clemmons, and in the face of all evidence had pleaded—

"Not guilty."

There seemed to be a desire upon the part of the jurors to serve, for all remembered that the Grangers had been a proud people, and many had felt that they had been snubbed by both father and son.

The pressure to hang a millionaire murderer, as Merton Granger was called, appeared great, and as there seemed hardly any one who deemed the prisoner innocent, it looked as though hang he must.

The prosecution laid great stress upon the fact that Merton Granger was not rich, that the property had been pledged by his father to pay the gambling debts of his son, and this was believed in spite of the proof offered by Mr. Clemmons that his client was a millionaire planter.

Then came the motive for the murder, to prevent Roderick Duval from changing his will, as well as to get possession of the thirty-five thousand dollars in cash, for his immediate use, and the letter, unfinished to the city attorney, was shown as proof that he was pressed and had the money to send.

In fact the case seemed a perfectly clear one, and without leaving their seats the eager jury pronounced the prisoner,

"Guilty!"

Their faces seemed to beam with delight at having so quickly done their duty, and the judge bowed his acquiescence and thanks for doing as he had charged them to do, find the prisoner guilty.

The two lawyers of the prosecution had been biting in their sarcasm against the accused, and cruel in their anathemas of him.

They did all in their power to hang him, and they shook hands with each other over and over again upon their success.

Merton Granger did not flinch under the severe ordeal, and when called to hear his sentence, and asked what he had to say, said:

"Circumstantial evidence alone will hang me, your Honor, for I am not guilty, and those men who have so shamefully abused me when I was at their mercy, and that jury who have taken delight in their finding, and you, who have so ruled with injustice, will all some day feel guilty of having hanged the wrong man; in other words your consciences will accuse you of murder, judicial though it was."

These few words fell like a thunderbolt upon all and made a deep impression.

The judge fairly trembled with rage in passing sentence, and the jury sat pale in their seats, while the two lawyers seemed to shun the eyes of the doomed man as he gazed upon them with a look of contempt.

Without a change of a muscle, Merton Granger received his sentence, and then went back to his cell in the jail, where he was kept heavily ironed, to await the day of his execution, which had been set two months from the time of his being found guilty.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO FRIENDS.

"Your man Hickory to see you, Mr. Granger."

"Shall I admit him?"

So spoke the jailer a week after the trial, addressing Merton Granger, who sat alone in his cell gazing out of his little window across the fields to the blue waters of the beautiful Chesapeake.

"Certainly, Mr. Ross, admit him, if you are not breaking your rules in doing so."

"I have no orders against it, Mr. Granger, and certainly if I can add to your comfort, or give you a moment of forgetfulness of yourself, in your hard lot, I shall be glad to do so," replied the kind-hearted jailer, who greatly liked his prisoner, and was wont to say that he was the finest person he had ever seen behind iron bars.

And so old Hickory entered the cell, where his master sat in irons.

The negro had just passed his fiftieth year, but the past two months had added ten years to his life, and tears stood in his honest eyes as he beheld his master seated upon his humble cot and weighted down with irons.

"Oh, master! to think that you should come to this, sah!" he groaned.

"I was found guilty, Hickory, and must suffer as would another in my position."

"I don't believe you are guilty, sah, I can never believe it, sah, and there's others that thinks as I do."

"But, master, I wanted to come to see you before, sah, only I was not feeling strong enough, but I had them send you a basket of provisions each day from the plantation, for the jailer to

give to you, and to-day I came and asked if I could see you, sah."

"I am glad that you did, my dear old friend."

"Sit down and let us have a talk together."

"No, one can hear us, sah?"

"Sit there while I keep my place on the bed, and you can see any one coming up the stairs along the hall, and I am the only prisoner here, I believe, the only guilty man in the county," and Merton Granger smiled.

Hickory took the seat, and with one eye upon the hall, said:

"Master, you don't intend to let 'em hang you, does you, sah?"

"I am powerless to prevent, so must submit to my fate."

"Maybe them that are outside of jail, sah, can prevent."

"I would not be the cause of any demonstration to release me, Hickory, which would end only with disaster and bloodshed; for, though most kind to me, Jailer Ross is a brave and determined man, and he would die rather than give me up to a mob, though he really does not wish to see me hang."

"Then his son and wife can also aid him, and I would not save my life at the cost of another."

Merton Granger spoke in a low, but earnest voice, and old Hickory said nothing for a while.

Then he remarked:

"There is no mob, master, that wishes to get you out."

"My uncle, then, and Nevil?"

"No sah, though they seems awful sorry that you has to hang, and maybe it is because they don't want to have kinsfolk die on the gallows."

"You are hard upon Uncle Dean and Nevil, Hickory, for they have been most kind to me, and they certainly did all they could for me at the trial."

"Yes, sah, they seemed to."

"Do you know aught to the contrary, Hickory?"

"No, sah, I only kinder don't like 'em."

"Well, don't be unjust toward them; but who is it that would serve me?"

"I am one, sah."

"I know that, my good friend, and you have ever been faithful to my father before me; but you can do nothing."

"I used to be considerable of a man, sah, your father said, in a tight pinch, and he has seen me tried."

"But I would not allow you to risk your life, or injure another, so let the matter drop as it is, for nothing could be done to save me."

"If it could be, sah, and no bloodshed, you'd escape?"

"Gladly, for I am not tired of life, good Hickory, and have no desire to remain here to be hanged."

"I am innocent, and were I free I might prove that I am not guilty."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, sah, and I'll come and see you again; but, master?"

"Well, Hickory?"

"Missy Lucille wants to come and see you, sah."

"Poor child!"

"She hain't so much a child as she looks, sah."

"Does she believe me guilty?"

"No, indeed, sah, she don't, and she wishes to come and see you, sah."

"This is a bad place for her to find me in."

"Yes, sah, but it is the best you can do, and she told me to ask you to let her come."

"Who will come with her?"

"I will, sah."

Merton was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"Tell her to come on Sunday afternoon, and, Hickory, go back by the village, and tell Lawyer Clemmons I desire to have him visit me tomorrow."

"Yes, sah," and as Hickory took his leave, he heard his master mutter to himself:

"He may be right after all, and I will be on the safe side."

"Yes, I will do it."

What the words meant Hickory did not know, but they set him to thinking, as he went out and mounted his horse which awaited him.

As he rode into a clump of woodland half a mile from the town, there suddenly appeared in sight a fair form on horseback.

It was Lucille Gazzam, pale, but looking very lovely in her girlish beauty.

Restraining her spirited horse as she drew near the negro, she asked quickly:

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, missy."

"What did he say?"

"He said you could come to see him Sunday afternoon, missy, and he looked mighty pleased when I told him you didn't believe him guilty."

"I am so glad that you told him, Hickory; but what did he say about escaping?"

"He said, missy, that he would not do so if anybody's life was to be sacrificed to save him, for the jailer would resist to the end to keep him, no matter how sorry he felt for him."

"I can believe that; but I will see him Sunday afternoon, Hickory, and in the mean time we must think up some plot to save him."

"Now, good-by, for I don't wish to be seen talking to you, or they might suspect us of planning Cousin Merton's escape," and Lucille rode rapidly away toward Valley View, her brain busy with her plotting to keep Merton Granger from dying upon the gallows.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CHANGED WILL.

To say that the dwellers in Valley View cottage were deeply wrought up, by the charge of murder against Merton Granger, and his sentence to death, would be to draw it mildly.

Poor Mrs. Dean seemed almost broken-hearted while her husband's face wore a stern look, and an anxious one.

Nevil was threatening in what he said, and seemed willing to head a mob to free the prisoner; but then he discovered that the mob deemed the prisoner guilty, so no one would act.

As for Lucille Gazzam, the blow seemed to be at first a severe one to her, but she rallied quickly, said that she knew that Merton Granger had never been guilty of a mean act, let alone the murder of an old man, and in her little brain she began to plot to set him free.

For some reason best known to herself she did not take any one at Valley View into her confidence; but as she was wont to ride about the country at will, mounted upon the beautiful horse Bolt, which Merton Granger had given her, she went to Mistletoe Manor and held sundry interviews with old Hickory.

Between these two, so unlike, but with a common cause between them, a plan was formed to first see the prisoner and then decide what was best to be done to aid his escape.

As has been seen, Hickory visited his master in the jail and then met Lucille afterward, and it had been agreed that she should see Merton Granger upon the next Sunday afternoon.

When Lawyer Clemmons, at the request of Hickory, called at the jail to see his unfortunate client, he found him quietly reading a novel.

The coolness of Merton had won the admiration of the lawyer, who also liked him greatly and against all seeming proofs never believed in his guilt.

"Well, Merton, you seem to be almost enjoying yourself," he said, pleasantly.

"I am enjoying this novel, for it breaks the monotony of my life here; but I sent for you, Mr. Clemmons, to have a confidential chat with you, and also to have you attend to some things for me."

"I am wholly at your service, Merton, and I would call oftener, but the truth is I feel so for you that it pains me to come here, as our appeal has been refused and I can do nothing for you."

"That means that I must hang?"

"Yes, I fear so."

"Can nothing be done to prevent?"

"Alas, nothing."

"Mr. Clemmons?"

"Yes."

"I am not guilty of this murder."

"So I believe, Merton."

"Were I, then I would accept the alternative calmly; but, being innocent, I wish to live."

"There is no hope."

"Can I not escape?"

"Ha! I had not thought of that, Merton."

"Could it not be arranged?"

"How?"

"You are free, I am in irons, so it remains for you to say how."

"I do not see how it can possibly be done."

"I have ample means, you know."

"A fortune would not bribe Jailer Ross to be a traitor to the trust placed in him."

"So I believe; but could it not be arranged so that he would not be mixed up in it?"

"I am at a loss to know how."

"As I am; but think it over, Mr. Clemmons, and remember, my purse is a long one and you can draw freely upon it."

"I will think it over, Merton; but I can give you no hope."

"Now to business."

"Yes."

"I wish to make my will."

"You will not let your father's will stand as it is now, in case of your death?"

"In favor of the Deans?"

"Yes."

"No, I will change it."

"In some one else's favor?"

"Yes."

"Who, may I ask?"

"Miss Lucille Gazzam."

"Ah! she is but a girl, hardly fifteen."

"In three years she will be a woman, and I wish her to have my property."

"You know that Planter Duval left her his heiress?"

"Yes, and I shall do as he did."

"She has a small fortune now, I believe, left by her parents?"

"Yes, which Leslie Dean holds in keeping for her."

"And with Duval's and yours, she will be the richest woman in the country."

"Yes, and will deserve to be."

The lawyer looked at Merton Granger for an instant in silence, and then asked:

"Will you cut the Deans off?"

"Oh, no, I shall remember them all, but my fortune goes to Lucille Gazzam, so draw up my will, according to these notes on this slip of paper, and bring it to me to sign, having your witnesses with you; but do not delay."

"I shall at once attend to it."

"And let it remain secret until after I am hanged, if hang I must."

"But should you escape?"

"Leave the will as I make it."

The lawyer looked puzzled.

He was an able legal light, understood law thoroughly, but outside of this was a slow thinking man, and was not one to arrange a plot to save a client's neck from the gallows, unless authority for so doing could be found between the covers of a law book.

Soon after he took his leave, anxious to save Merton from hanging, but wholly at sea as to the means of doing so.

And Merton Granger, when again left alone, said:

"Clemmons, with all his legal learning, is not equal to the occasion of a bold movement, but Lucille, girl though she is, will be, I feel assured."

"But I must check her, for she shall not get into trouble on my account."

CHAPTER XXII.

LUCILLE'S PLOT.

SUNDAY afternoon came around, and Lucille Gazzam was anxious to be away to keep her appointment with Merton Granger.

It was not her wont to ride horseback on Sunday, driving to church with her aunt being the only outdoor airing that she took on the Sabbath; but Merton had appointed that day for her to come, knowing that there would be no visitors at the jail to see her, and when the good country folk would keep at home after attending meeting somewhere in the morning.

Donning her riding habit, Lucille slipped out of the mansion unseen, and reaching the stables, told the negro boy in charge there to saddle Bolt for her, and to say nothing of her going out riding.

"Lordy, Missy 'Cille, you won't go to Hebben when you dies ef yer breaks de Sabbuf ridin' on Sunday," said Dan, who was a devout church member.

"I'll have to risk it, Dan; but I am going on an errand of mercy, for Mrs. Trenchard is sick, I hear."

"Dat alters de case, Missy 'Cille."

"Don't speak of my going, though."

"No, missy."

So Lucille mounted Bolt, and going out the rear road, soon gained the woods, and through them reached the highway.

Mrs. Trenchard, whom Lucille said was ill, was the wife of a poor farmer who lived a couple of miles from Valley View, and one of her children had come over to the Deans' that morning to ask for some medicine for his mother, and Lucille had gotten it for him from the family medicine-chest, at the same time having quite a talk with the lad, who was about ten years old, for a bright idea had suddenly flashed into the head of the pretty maiden, which she meant to carry out if in her power to do so.

She had told Hickory to meet her in the woods, half-way between Valley View and the village, and she would tell him the secret of her visit to his master, and she started at a gallop to the rendezvous with the old negro, hoping to find him there.

And her hope was realized, for, mounted upon his mule, Hickory was just riding toward the spot where Lucille had told him to meet her, when she dashed up.

"Oh, Hickory, I am so glad," she cried, excitedly.

"You have seen Merton, missy?"

"No, but I am going now; only I came by here first, hoping to find you."

"Now I have a little plan in my head to get Cousin Merton free to-night, and I wish you to go back to Mistletoe at once and get his fleetest horse, and lead him to the woods back of the jail."

"Be there just at sunset; and get his pistols, and—have you any money, Hickory?"

"I has some of my own, missy, and lots that belongs to master, for I took it from his desk, along with some papers, the night he was arrested, and hid 'em all."

"That is glorious! so get the money and bring it with you, and meet me just at sunset in the woods, as I said; but don't let any one see you go there, so you had better cross the fields through the Duval Plantation."

"Yes, missy."

"If I am not there by dark, wait for me, and I hope to have a surprise for you."

"Now go, Hickory, and don't lose any time, for you have only about two hours to get there in."

"I'll lose no time, missy," and Hickory surprised his mule by going off at a gallop, while Lucille turned her horse back in the direction which she had come.

Her lovely face flushed and paled by turns, for she was playing a deep game, called up by the coming of the Trenchard boy to Valley View that morning.

A gallop of half an hour brought her to the Trenchard Farm.

It was an humble place, though comfortable, and the farmer dwelt there with his wife and half a dozen offspring.

Just as Lucille rode up, Farmer Trenchard came out and wended his way toward the barn, where she hailed him:

"Good afternoon, Mr. Trenchard. How is your wife this afternoon, for Fred told me she was quite sick?"

"She is, Miss Lucille, and I was just going to hitch up and go after the doctor for her, for she has these spells now and then, and they get worse each time."

"I am going to the village, Mr. Trenchard, and will call and ask the doctor to come here at once, so you need not leave your wife."

"It's mighty kind of you, miss, and I'll thank you if you will."

"Don't you think Mrs. Trenchard should have somebody with her, too, for I can stop at the jail, and ask her sister, Mrs. Ross, to come also."

"I really wish you would, miss, for my wife would like to have her, though she knows if she comes she'll have to bring her son, Jack, and Ross hates to be left all alone at the jail."

"Well, in a case of sickness it cannot be helped, so I will ask her to come."

"But can I do anything for her?"

"No, miss."

"I will come in and see her for a moment," and as she spoke Lucille dismounted and entered the house.

She found Mrs. Trenchard suffering considerably, and after doing what she could think of to help her, remounted her horse and rode away.

Straight to the village she went and calling at the office of Doctor Hunter asked him to go at once to the sick woman.

Then she rode to the jail, arriving there just as she had planned to do, when the sun was setting.

The jailer answered her knock, and riding in to the yard, Lucille told her story.

She spoke of Fred Trenchard's coming over to Valley View after medicine for her mother, and how she had determined to ride over to the farm and see how she was.

In fact she made a very strong case in favor of Mrs. Ross's going at once to her sister, and Jack, a twenty-year-old youth and his father's assistant was sent to hitch the horse to the buggy with all dispatch.

"Mr. Ross, do you mind letting me see my cousin, Mr. Merton Granger?" asked the cunning little maiden, as Mrs. Ross drove off with Jack.

"I have no orders against it, Miss Lucille; but you'll be late getting home, for it's almost dark now."

"Oh, I have company waiting for me, Mr. Ross," and Lucille choked slightly as she implied an untruth, but consoled herself with the thought that Hickory was waiting for her, and more, that if she gained her point, she could well afford to sin a little.

"Well, Miss Lucille, I will take you to him," said the kind-hearted jailer.

"And, Mr. Ross," said Lucille as she dismounted:

"I have such a curious desire to see what is called the death cell, in which I have heard three men have committed suicide, and people condemned to be hanged are put ten days before they are to die!" and Lucille opened her large eyes in wonder.

"It's a gloomy place for pretty eyes like yours to gaze upon, Miss Lucille."

"But I am anxious to see the room, and read on the wall the poetry which one poor fellow wrote there, for Uncle Leslie has told me all about it, you know."

"I'll show it to you, Miss Lucille, and as it is getting dark we'll go there first," and lighting his lantern the jailer led the way along the dismal corridor toward the wing where the death chamber was situated.

It was in the rear of the jail, and upon the basement floor, with thick walls and a narrow door of heavy wood, studded with iron.

Taking his keys from his belt the jailer inserted the proper one into the lock, and the next moment the door was opened.

The glowing western sky shed a soft light into the room from a narrow window, covered with massive iron bars; but the close air of the cell caused Lucille to say:

"Please open the window, Mr. Ross."

The jailer stepped forward to raise the sash, when, noiselessly and quickly Lucille glided toward the door, and when it clanged to, and the key turned in the creaking lock he knew that he was a prisoner, entrapped by a girl.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FREE.

WHEN Lucille turned the key upon the jailer, she leant against the wall for support, for her heart beat so that she feared she was going to faint.

But nerving herself to the task before her, she called out:

"Forgive me, good Mr. Ross; but I cannot let Cousin Merton die on the gallows."

"You will be released in good time."

The sound of her voice barely reached the amazed and startled jailer, through the massive door: but he called back.

"It is a bold game you have played, Lucille Gazzam, and if successful, we will both suffer for it."

"I hope not," she answered, and taking the keys from the lock she hastened away along the corridor, guided by the jailer's lantern, which he had placed on the floor when he unlocked the cell door.

Reaching the end of the corridor she hesitated an instant, to find out which way to go.

The lights in the jail had just been lit when she rode up, so the dismal place had not darkness to render it more so.

Two of the negroes on the Valley View Plantation had been in the jail; one lived there for a year, and the other was a prisoner there for running away from his master.

These two men Lucille had questioned closely about the drear abode, until she got the exact plan of the building in her mind, and also learned all about the habits of Jailer Ross.

She knew that he carried all of his keys upon his belt, and that when he opened a door they were all attached to the one in the lock.

Having laid her plans, when Fred Trenchard had told her his mother was sick, to get Mrs. Ross to visit her sister, and knowing that Jack would have to drive her there, the daring girl decided to act boldly and attempt to entrap the jailer.

If she failed, she would have done her best.

If successful, she could set Merton Granger free.

The jail had been an old brick plantation house, at one time, and afterward had been transformed into a court house; but when the county built a court house, it had been made the jail, for which it was admirably suited in many respects.

With her knowledge of the place, from questions asked, and of the methods of Jailer Ross, Lucille had acted with fearlessness and promptness.

She knew that the jailer was as secure in that death cell, as was Merton Granger in his quarters, and she hastened away to free the latter.

Approaching the corridor where his room was located, she called out:

"Cousin Merton!"

From his window Merton Granger had seen Lucille ride up and alone.

He had expected that Nevil Dean, or his uncle would accompany her, and was surprised that they had not done so.

Then he saw the buggy drive away, containing the jailer's wife and son, and he wondered why Lucille did not come to his cell.

"Has she been refused, I wonder?"

"I should have spoken to Ross about her coming, and asked him to allow her to come, for I remember I told him I cared to see no one."

Just then he heard his name called, for his door was but an iron grating, and not closed as was the one leading into the death cell.

"Yes, Lucille," he answered.

She hastened to the door, and, to his utter amazement he not only saw that she carried a lantern, and was alone, but that she held the bunch of jail keys in her hands.

"Why, Lucille, my sweet little girl, what does this mean?"

"Don't talk now, Cousin Merton, for this is no time to answer questions, as I wish to get you out."

"But the jailer?"

"Is in the death cell, where I shut him up, for I pretended I wanted to see the room, and as he went to open the window I ran out and locked him in."

"Then Mrs. Ross and Jack have gone to the Trenchard farm, and I'll have you out of here just as soon as I can find the key which opens this door— Oh! here it is!" and Lucille hastily threw open the door.

Then she sought out the keys that fitted the irons upon the prisoner, and with trembling hands soon had him free.

With a bound she sprung into his arms and cried:

"You said I might come to see you, Cousin Merton, and I have come!"

Merton Granger was too deeply affected to speak.

The brave girl had told him of her daring plot in the few words that she had uttered.

But he dreaded that trouble would come to her.

"My brave, noble girl, you have indeed set me free; but what will be the result to you?"

"Nothing."

"I fear to the contrary."

"I'm but a girl, not of age, only fifteen, and what can they do, for Jailer Ross isn't hurt, unless he swears himself to death."

"Come, for Hickory is waiting not far away in the woods, and has your horse and some money for you."

"Come, Cousin Merton."

"God bless you, Lucille," and the man's voice trembled as he spoke.

"But what are you to do?" he added.

"See you mounted and gone and then go home, get my scolding for going riding horseback on Sunday and staying out too long; but I'll keep quiet until morning, and then tell just what I did, but you'll be too far off to be caught then."

"And the jailer?"

"Oh! he must stay in the cell until they let him out."

"You have had to stand it for a long time, so one night won't hurt him."

"But please come, Cousin Merton," and taking him by the arm, she drew him out of the cell.

He walked in a cramped way at first; but soon got the better use of his limbs, and they descended to the jail-yard, where Lucille's horse awaited her.

It was now dark, and Merton glanced out of the gate which he opened, but saw no one in sight.

Then Lucille mounted and they passed out into the road, and turned away from the village, the lights of which were seen a quarter of a mile away.

At the request of Lucille, Merton sprung up behind her, and they started at a gallop for the woods, where Hickory was to be in waiting.

As they rode along they heard a distant shout.

"It is poor Ross, shouting in the hope that some one will hear him; but as the cell opens only toward the woods, there is little fear of any one doing so," said Merton Granger.

In five minutes more they turned off of the highway into the woods, and soon came upon Hickory.

He was mounted upon a horse now, having discarded his mule as too slow a brute, and held his master's splendid riding animal by the rein.

"Ah master! master! Missy Lucille have done this, all by her sweet self," cried Hickory as he grasped his master's hand.

"Yes, Hickory, but you have done your share too, and I am free, owing it to Lucille and to you alone."

"Please don't delay to talk, Cousin Merton, for you must be going."

"Good-by."

She leant over from her saddle, for he had dismounted and stood by her, and hastily kissing him, turned her horse and darted away like the wind.

"She must not go that lonely road home alone," cried Merton.

"Nothing can catch her, master, and you are the one in danger, sah."

"Please mount, sah, and as we ride along, for I'll go some little way with you, sah, I'll give you the money and things I has for you; but it's all Missy Lucille's doings sah, every bit of it."

"Heaven bless her, and you too, Hickory," and Merton Granger sprung upon the back of his faithful horse, hardly able to repress a shout as he felt himself once again a free man.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A HEROINE.

WHEN Lucille had dashed so abruptly away, it was to urge Merton Granger to at once make haste to depart from a neighborhood filled with such peril to him.

She carried with her the keys of the jail, and she meant to hold on to them to the last.

About her reception at Valley View, after breaking the Sabbath by riding horseback, and remaining out so late, she was doubtful, for her guardian was a firm churchman and did not believe in anything that would prevent a perfect keeping of Sunday.

Then too she knew it would be after ten o'clock before she could reach home, and what excuse she could give she did not know.

She had not the slightest fear for herself, for having gained her point, in the release of Merton Granger, she did not think of herself.

She had told Merton, in their ride from the jail to the woods, that she had heard that a packet was to sail on the morrow at dawn from a port some miles down the coast, and if he could reach the vessel in time he would be able to get to Baltimore and thus be safe.

That he would be taken, once he was free, did not enter her mind, and it was only when the lights of Valley View came in sight, that her heart began to beat for herself.

"Dan, have they missed me?" she asked, as the negro boy came forward to take her horse.

"Yas, missy, and missus is a'most wild about you, while Massa Nevil have gone out to hunt you up."

"All right; I am found," and she nerved herself to meet her guardian and his wife.

They were upon the piazza, pacing to and fro, and watching down the road for her coming, or the return of Nevil, so that she gave them a surprise when she quietly came out of the house, having just been to her room and exchanged her riding-habit for a house dress.

"Oh, Lucille, where have you been?" cried Mrs. Dean, excitedly.

"Yes, you naughty child, where have you been?" and Leslie Dean spoke sternly, his alarm having switched suddenly over into anger.

"I have been riding."

"What! on Sunday?"

"Yes, auntie."

"Breaking the Sabbath," sternly said Leslie Dean.

"Yes, uncle, I broke it, if horseback riding will break the Sabbath."

"It certainly will. But where have you been?"

"Oh, riding about the country."

"And to remain out so late?"

"It is late, auntie."

"And Nevil's been searching everywhere for you."

"Not everywhere, or he'd have found me."

"Don't be pert, miss, but tell me what escapade you have been off on."

"I will tell you to-morrow, uncle."

"I wish to know now."

"I will not tell you until to-morrow."

"Then who have you been with?"

"Well, poor, sick Mrs. Trenchard for one, and I went to the doctor's for her, as she is very sick."

"Good-night, uncle and auntie, for I am very tired and sleepy, and I will tell you all in the morning," and Lucille entered the house and went to her room, while Mrs. Dean said:

"Leslie, she has been on an errand of mercy, and does not deserve angry words, poor child."

"Just to think of her riding alone to the village, after the doctor, and returning by night."

Just then Nevil Dean rode up, and told his story.

Lucille had been to the Trenchards, and then went after the doctor and Mrs. Ross, for Farmer Trenchard's wife was very ill, he said, and she had doubtless returned home from the village, and so he had missed her.

But when Lucille came down to breakfast the following morning, she had another story to tell.

She placed the huge bunch of keys upon the table by her guardian, and said:

"Uncle, I will now tell you where I went yesterday, and what I was doing."

"I was determined that Cousin Merton should not die upon the gallows, and so plotted to save him, and I did, for here are the jail keys, and if you will ride to the jail you will find Jailer Ross locked up in the death-cell, where he has been since dark last night."

"And Merton?" gasped Mrs. Dean, while Mr. Dean and Nevil were upon their feet, the picture of amazement.

"Escaped last night, and is now beyond all hope of capture."

"But are you not all glad at the news?" and she turned her large eyes from one to the other. From the lips of Mrs. Dean came a fervent:

"Thank God!"

But neither Leslie Dean or his son spoke.

They seemed almost paralyzed by what they heard.

But at last Mr. Dean said sternly:

"Lucille, you have brought upon yourself and upon us no end of trouble by this bold act of yours."

"Tell me just what you have done?"

"I am alone to blame, for you are not concerned in it, uncle, nor is Nevil or auntie, and I advise you to free your skirts of all censure by riding at once to the jail and releasing Mr. Ross."

"Tell the squire that I did it, and I am ready to suffer for my act if need be, and that you may know what to report, I shall tell you all as it occurred."

And Lucille told her story, all excepting the connection which old Hickory had with the affair, for she did not mention his name, but led her uncle to believe that Merton Granger had left the jail on foot.

In hot haste the father and son then mounted their horses and rode away toward the village, ten miles distant.

By a strange coincidence they met the squire going to the jail, and as no one had been there that morning, Mrs. Ross not having returned, the jailer was still confined in the death-cell.

He was white with rage, when released; but the squire having heard Lucille's story, said:

"No blame can rest upon you, Ross; but let me hear what you have to say?"

The jailer told his story, too, and the squire broke forth into a hearty laugh.

"Well, well, outwitted by a petticoat hardly in her teens!"

"Why, Ross, this is too good to keep; and I tell you that Miss Lucille is a heroine and all the young men in the country will be trying to win her."

"As Granger has escaped, I may say, unofficially, I am not sorry, for somehow I could not believe him guilty; but we must do all we can to uphold the law and recapture him."

"But what's to be done with that daring girl?" growled Jailer Ross, who did not relish the position he found himself in. "God knows, for I don't."

"Why, nothing can be done with the pretty little minx; but come, let us give the alarm,

offer a reward, and do all we can to capture Granger, though I hope we will not be able to."

"Master Nevil, if you don't fall in love with pretty Lucille Gazzam after what she has done, then you are not the young man I take you to be."

"She is but a child, squire, and like a sister to me."

"A sister, yes, but only an adopted one; but come, let us spread the alarm."

And the alarm was spread, the whole country was aroused, and hundreds of horsemen rode hither and thither in search of the escaped prisoner.

Mistletoe was visited and thoroughly searched, while old Hickory was questioned and cross-questioned.

But he would tell nothing, and all of the horses of Mistletoe being found in the stables, no one suspected that Merton Granger had received aid from any of his old slaves.

For several days the search continued without avail, and then was given up, though the daring escape still remained the topic of conversation, and Lucille was voted a beautiful young heroine.

To the squire and other officials who had visited her at Valley View, Lucille had told her story; but she gave no clue as to how Merton Granger had left the jail, and led all to suppose that she had received no aid from any one.

And entreaties and threats failed to move her, or make her say more than she was willing to.

And all this time, securely hidden in a secret closet in Mistletoe Manor, Merton Granger was abiding his time until he could safely get away from the, to him, most perilous locality.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNLOOKED FOR VISITOR.

THERE was one room in Mistletoe Manor which but two persons living knew the existence of.

It had been the desire of the first master of Mistletoe to build one place where, in case of the landing of a raiding party from the English fleet during the Revolutionary War, the valuables of the mansion could be secreted.

This he did by making a false wall to one of the rooms in the upper story, and having what was supposed to be dummy windows opening from the outer wall.

The entrance to this room was through a panel on one side of the broad fire-place, and which was opened by a secret spring.

The fireplace was supposed to be in the solid outer wall, and so appeared even to a close observer; but beyond it was a long, narrow passage, or room, not more than five feet in width, and twenty-five in length, with windows on the outer side which were never opened, and were supposed to be merely mock windows.

But the sashes could be raised at will, and thus give air to the secret chamber.

This room Planter Granger had told Merton of when he was home on leave, as a young naval officer, and its existence had never been suspected by the youth before.

In it were kept some ancient papers and a few heirlooms of the Grangers, with certain valuables that were not in use.

Not even the Deans, in their stay in the mansion, had suspected the existence of the secret chamber, and Merton had not spoken to any one of the family about it, and supposed that he alone knew of its existence.

"Master, don't you think, sah, you better go with me to Mistletoe, and wait there until you can get away in a good boat, which I can charter for you, sah?" said Hickory, after Lucille Gazzam had departed from the two so abruptly.

"Why, Hickory, Mistletoe will be the first place searched for me."

"Let 'em s'arch it, sah, they can't find the secret chamber."

"Ha! you know of that room, which I had nearly forgotten about, Hickory?"

"Yes, sah, your good father didn't keep any secrets from me, sah," replied the negro, with pride at the remembrance of the trust placed in him.

"You were deserving of all his confidence, my good Hickory, as you are of mine; but it would be a good idea, I believe, for me to hide in the secret chamber until I can get away."

"Yes, sah, for I can go up to Baltimore, sah, and charter a vessel thar for you, to carry you to Boston, or to New Orleans, where you think best."

"My cousin Nevil might go, for you would doubtless be followed there, Hickory."

"Don't let Mars' Nevil go, sah, nor his father.

"No, master, don't trust nobody 'cepting Missy Lucille and me."

"I'll do as you think best, Hickory; but let us now ride to Mistletoe and no one must see me enter the house, while you will have to put my horse up and get the saddle-stains off of him."

"I'll do it, sah, for they might come nosing around and see that he has been ridden."

So saying, the negro started off, and Merton Granger rode by his side.

Avoiding the highways as much as possible, they at last reached Mistletoe, and Hickory led the horses to the stable and put them up, intending to come later and rub off the saddle-stains from them.

Merton paced to and fro in the shadow of the foliage, glad to get a chance to exercise himself after his long confinement, and soon Hickory joined him.

The negro had been left in full charge of the mansion, in which he slept, so that he had the key and quickly opened the door.

The shades were pulled down then, a lamp was lighted, and a search in the pantry revealed a few edibles and some wine, which Merton Granger partook of with great relish.

"I won't let you starve, master, never fear; but I'll feel better, sah, when you are safe in the secret chamber."

Hickory knew the spring that opened the panel-door, and touching it, the secret chamber was revealed.

The sashes were raised and the door of the room left open to give a circulation of air.

The room through which the secret chamber was entered, had been used as a spare bedroom, and Hickory took some bed-clothing and made up a bed on the floor.

Then he brought some wine and water, a cheese and some stale bread, and said:

"You won't starve, master, if I don't get a chance to visit you for a day or so."

"I know I shall be taken good care of, Hickory, and will now bid you good-night, for you must look after the horses, as it will not do for them to suspect that you aided me in my escape."

"By the time you return I will have thought up some plan of escape, and what I shall do in the future," and so saying, Merton shook hands with the faithful negro and entered the secret chamber.

Tired out with his exertion, after his long confinement, he threw himself down upon the pallet and was soon fast asleep.

He slept for hours, for when he awoke he heard voices beneath the window.

For a moment it was hard to recall what had happened and where he was; but soon he did so, and glancing through the holes in the closed blinds, he saw half a dozen horsemen in the yard.

He recognized several of them as officers of the law, and also noted that in a larger party who arrived, were the judge who had sentenced him, the prosecuting lawyers who had so severely attacked him, and half a dozen of the jury who had taken such delight in finding him guilty.

He heard the remarks of all, praise for Lucille's pluck and bold act, but censure of himself for having fled and left a young girl to stand the blame.

"We must catch him and hang him, to vindicate the law," said the judge.

"Yes, he must be taken and hanged," one of the lawyers remarked, while the other chimed in with:

"If he escapes the gallows, after his foul murder of a poor old man of seventy, it will be a disgrace to our country and ourselves."

"He must be found."

"We dare not let him escape."

"Burn the mansion down, I say, for he's hidden in it somewhere."

"If he escapes our search for him, then he is not here, that is certain."

"If we catch him, let us hang him at once, so there will be no more escaping."

"What's to be done with his property if he hangs?"

"The Deans will get it, and they are nice people and deeply feel the disgrace he has brought upon them."

"What shall we do with that girl for setting him free?"

"Nothing."

"No, let her go free, say I."

"It is said that he made his will leaving her all his property if she would help him to escape, for Lawyer Clemmons's clerk copied the will."

"Then she was paid to do as she did?"

"Yes, and I think she should go to jail if she is a girl."

Such was the conversation of the men who had been in the jury-box and found Merton Granger guilty of murder.

And as they stood in the shelter of the massive trees beneath the windows, he saw them and heard all that they said.

When they spoke of punishing Lucille he was almost tempted to betray himself.

His face became livid, his teeth were firm-set and he dug his nails into the palms of his hands in his effort to control his deep emotion.

Then the search of the mansion was begun, and for hours it was continued.

But the secret chamber defied them.

He heard loud voices, shouts, cries and oaths, and knew that his wine closet had been broken into and raided, and words that were cruelly bitter against him and those he had loved were upon many lips.

At last the horsemen mounted and rode away, shouting and yelling like red-skins; and only the persuasions of a few cool heads among them prevented their setting the mansion on fire.

The day dragged its length along, and night came.

Still the man stood at the window, almost gasping for air, so deep was his emotion.

Suddenly he started, for there came a sound behind him.

The panel was opened and a light streamed in.

"My God! Lucille, you here?" and Merton Granger struck his forehead with his clinched fist to see if he was awake and not dreaming.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PUT TO THE TEST.

THE crowd that had gone to search Mistletoe Manor were of a class ready to breed mischief.

The "jury of his peers" had been selected from among men with whom Merton Granger had nothing in common, and they were only too willing to aid in hanging an aristocrat, one of a circle which they could not enter.

The prosecuting attorney against the young sailor was a man whose father had been the bitter foe of Planter Granger.

The two had had several lawsuits together, which had engendered bitterness and hatred on the part of the lawyer, and indifference as far as the planter was concerned.

The feeling of hate had descended to the attorney's son, and one day he had insulted Planter Granger and been promptly knocked down for so doing.

He had challenged the planter and though he had tried to kill him, Mr. Mercer had received his fire and walked away, making even a greater enemy of him by this act than before.

With this feeling in his heart against the planter, he had visited his bitterness against the son, and his partner in the case had simply taken the cue from his senior.

The judge was a man who was self-made and despised aristocrats, as he deemed the Grangers.

He had once punished one of Planter Granger's slaves without cause, and had been held to strict account for so doing, having been horsewhipped by Mr. Granger in the streets of the village before a number of his friends.

As he was very near-sighted, Planter Granger had refused to meet him in a duel when challenged, stating that he did not wish to fight a blind man, and there the matter had rested.

But the judge never forgot the planter, and visited his revenge upon the son when he came before him charged with the murder of Roderick Duval.

Thus the reader can see that even had there been any doubt in favor of Merton Granger, he would have had a severe ordeal to face in those who were to sit in judgment upon him.

When not seated upon the bench, the judge did pretty much as he pleased, and the two prosecuting attorneys lost their dignity

when not under the judicial eye, shining upon them from the seat in the court chambers.

So it was that when some "investigator" discovered wine in great quantities in Mistletoe Manor, that the crowd did not consider it any harm to drink that which was the property of a fugitive murderer.

They began with a bottle or two and ended up with a score, the result of which was soon evident.

Hickory had been anxious to lead the search through the mansion, but they had not availed themselves of his offer, but had gone without guidance.

Still the old negro had followed them about, urging them not to disturb anything, as many were more than willing to do, and he got soundly cursed for his efforts to protect his master's property.

As Hickory was the negro whom the judge had once punished, and in turn met with punishment from Planter Granger, that judicial worthy eyed him askance and seemed only anxious to repay an old debt upon him.

When the wine began to flow freely, glasses were broken and considerable damage done, until Hickory could stand it no longer and appealed to the judge as a gentleman, to protect and not destroy.

Instantly a drunken man, one of the jurymen called out:

"Judge, I have watched that man close, and I tell you he knows where his master is, and I believe he is hiding him somewhere in this very house."

This caused every eye to turn upon Hickory; but the brave negro did not flinch.

"Do you know where your master is?" asked one.

"My master wouldn't come here, sah, to his house, if he expected to escape," was the reply.

"Do you know?" yelled several voices in chorus.

"Lordy, gentlemen, does you think I'd tell you if I did?"

"He knows!"

"Make him tell!"

"Whip it out of him!"

"Tie him up and lash him!"

Such were the cries heard upon all sides, and poor Hickory felt that he was in for it! But he stood his ground firmly.

The judge, seeing that there was going to be trouble, and not caring to countenance, but willing to have the negro suffer, quietly slipped out of the room, and the two attorneys, with a wink at the crowd, followed.

This was equivalent to an invitation for the guard to do as they pleased, and their pleasure just then was mischief.

At once they rushed upon Hickory, who, though as powerful as a giant, in spite of having passed the milestone of half a hundred of years, offered no resistance.

He was quickly carried out upon the piazza, ropes were secured and he was tied to a tree, while riding-whips were brought into requisition.

"Now tell where your master is, or we'll beat it out of you, you black dog!" said the man who had been foreman of Merton Granger's jury, and on that account assumed the leadership.

"Master, I never was struck a blow by my own master, sah, and I begs you not to whip me," pleaded Hickory.

"Will you tell?"

"How can I tell, master, what I don't know?"

"Strip him!" yelled the leader, and willing hands tore the clothes from the negro, exposing his hard, muscular back to view.

"Now will you tell?"

"No, master."

"Lay on your whips, gentlemen!"

The order was obeyed with an alacrity that showed how prone the crowd was to cruelty, and half a dozen riding-whips descended upon the bare back.

Hickory groaned and writhed, but then remained almost motionless, heroically standing the fearful punishment.

"Will you tell now, you dog?"

"Master, I would die first!" was the firm response of the brave negro.

"Then die you shall!" came the inhuman reply, and the whip fell thick and fast, until suddenly a voice cried out:

"Hold! do you not see that he is dead?"

"No, he is feigning," cried another.

"He has fainted, so let up with your punishment, unless you intend to kill him," and a man laid his hand upon the pulse of the unconscious negro.

Then he was relieved from his bonds, and some frightened negroes standing near, eager and anxious spectators of the scene, were told to carry poor Hickory off and care for him.

This they did, while the wild crowd, half-crazed with liquor, mounted their horses and rode away in the darkness, leaving Mistletoe Manor once more in silence and solitude.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN ALLY.

HICKORY was borne by the sympathetic negroes, who had stood watching his cruel punishment, to one of the cabins in the quarters where a young negro dwelt with his dusky bride.

Toward Hickory this young negro man, Boston by name, had felt always the deepest respect and regard, as in fact did all of the slaves upon the Mistletoe Plantation, for the faithful body-servant of their master was looked upon as a most remarkable personage.

Hickory had never "put on airs," in spite of his extended travels and the confidence placed in him by his masters, father and son, and he was popular with all the negroes from the oldest old man on the place, to the youngest pickaninny.

Boston had been saved from a severe punishment once by Hickory, and the young negro had never forgotten it; but, in fact, influenced by him he had given up his wild life and become respected by all upon the plantation.

To Boston's cabin then Hickory was taken in a fainting condition, and suffering greatly.

Any man of less strength and endurance than he possessed, would have died under the cruel lashing given him by the drunken crowd; but though unable to walk, and in a bad way, he yet was in no danger of dying if properly cared for and he took rest.

"Boston, I want to have a talk with you," he said, as soon as he could speak and had been told that the crowd had gone.

"All right, Uncle Hickory, I'll ask the folks to go out," replied the young negro, and he was, at his request, left alone with the old man, though his sable bride could not see why she could not hear what was to be said to her husband.

"I want you to do something for me, Boston."

"Yas, sah."

"I wish to be taken into the big house, and put on a cot near the front door, for you know my duty is to guard the place."

"Yas, Uncle Hickory; but is you able?"

"Not to walk; but you must get the men to tote me there, and then you give out that you will remain with me all night."

"Yas, sah."

"When I am in the big house I'll tell you what I wants you to do."

"All right, sah."

"Now call the boys and let 'em tote me there."

Boston did as he was told, and Hickory was borne to the manor by four stout negroes, who carried him as carefully as though he were an infant.

His torn back had already been skillfully dressed by an old negress who was a good doctress, and he was made as comfortable as was possible upon a cot just by the front door of the mansion, and where he could put forth his hand and open it.

The negroes were then dismissed, and told to go to their quarters and remain quiet, for it was growing dark, and Boston remained alone with Hickory.

Hickory kept quiet for a few minutes, until the shadows of night deepened about him, and then he said:

"Boston, I wish to know if I can trust you?"

"Lordy! Uncle Hickory, doesn't you know you kin?"

"I feel that I can; but I wish you to do something for me, and you must not tell nobody, not even your wife."

"I won't whisper nothin', sah."

"Well, go to the stables and mount massa's horse, Pilot, and take along with you the animal Missy Lucille used to ride when she was here."

"Lady Lucille, as Master Nevil called her?"

"Yes, and put a side-saddle on her and go with all speed to Valley View."

"Mind, boy, don't ride up to the house, but stop in the woods, hitch your horses and go to the cabin of Aunt Phillis—"

"Your sister, sah?"

"Yes, and tell her that I sent you there and she must go in and wake Missy Lucille up if she has gone to bed, and tell her to come out dressed in her riding-habit."

"Tell Phillis to say to her that I sent for her, and when she comes out, you tell her to ride here with you, boy, and bring her the front way, for nobody must see her come, do you hear?"

"Yas, sah," and Boston felt his importance in being trusted upon a matter of such secrecy.

"You must tell Phillis not to let any one know that Missy Lucille leaves the house, for she can get to her room without being seen, as she keeps the back-door key."

"I'll tell her, sah."

"Now, go, Boston, and remember, no one must know of this!"

"No, sah," and Boston, who was the groom of the Mistletoe stables, departed, leaving the mansion by the front door, which Hickory closed after him, as the knob was in reach of his hand as he lay upon his cot.

Ten minutes after, Boston was mounted upon Pilot, and leading Lady Lucille, had started for Valley View.

In his younger days, that is his boyhood years, Boston had been a sad case, and it was his desire to invade the watermelon patches and hen-roosts of neighbors that had gotten him into serious trouble.

These foraging expeditions, however, had taught him cunning and caution, and he was the very man for an expedition such as Hickory had sent him upon.

He sought a secluded spot in the woods, where he hitched his horses and muzzled them, so that they would not neigh and betray him.

Then he went to the cabin of old Aunt Phillis, a trusted servant in the Granger family for half a century, and the eldest sister of Hickory.

The good old soul was reading her Bible, preparatory to going to bed, for it was after nine o'clock, when Boston knocked at the door.

The family in the mansion had retired early, after the exciting scenes of the day, and silence and darkness reigned therein.

"Lordy, chile, you a'most skeert me," said Aunt Phillis, as Boston suddenly stepped into the door.

"Sh!" said the young negro, with a look of caution, and in a few words he told Phillis what he had come for.

"Lor' ha marcy! they'll kill little missy yet, for she hain't no strong woman ter stan' all this rumpus! but I'll go and tell her, though it have been a powerful worry on her all day, arter she hab set dear good master free."

"Jist you wait here, Bos'on, and I'll go and git her, for she'll go, I knows, and it must be very important or Bro' Hickory wouldn't have sent for her," and the old negress, to whom Boston had not told of the punishment given Hickory, hustled out of the cabin.

In half an hour she was back again, and Lucille was with her.

She was clad in her riding-habit, and looked pale, and, recognizing Boston, asked quickly:

"What is it, Boston?"

"Don't know, Missy 'Cille, only Uncle Hick'ry wants ter see yer powerful bad and told me to fetch yer, so I obeys him and has ther hosses over yonder waitin'."

"I will go at once; but, Mam' Phillis, please wait up for me, as I shall return as soon as I can," and Lucille followed Boston out of the cabin.

They crossed the yard noiselessly, and soon gained the woods, when Lucille was raised to her saddle by Boston, and they rode off at a gallop, taking the road to Mistletoe Manor.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LUCILLE'S FLUCK.

Boston conducted Lucille by a way that led to a clump of trees near the mansion,

and where the horses could be left, and from there they went on foot up to the house.

A light tap on the door and it was opened by Hickory from his cot, and Lucille slightly started as she beheld him, though Boston had told her the story of the punishment inflicted upon him by the searchers for Merton Granger.

"Ah! how cruel! some day they will regret this," burst from the lips of Lucille, as she saw that the negro was unable to rise, and hardly could raise his arm.

"Yes, missy, it's bad indeed; but they thought I knew where master was and wanted to force me to tell."

"But I'd have died first, if I had known where he was."

"Now, Boston, I want you to do something for me."

"Yes, Uncle Hick'ry."

"I think I needs some good food, and I want you to get your wife, Lucindy, to boil me a chicken, and cook me up some hoe-cake right away, along with a pot of coffee."

"You help her and get the things here soon as you can, while Missy Lucille stays with me, for I want her to do some writing, in case I should die."

"Lordy, Unele Hick'ry, don't talk that way," said Boston, who did not notice the incongruities in Hickory's remarks, of wanting coffee, hoe-cake and boiled chicken, and thinking of dying too.

But Boston departed upon his errand, and when his step died away, Hickory said eagerly:

"Missy, master is here."

Lucille started, and asked quickly:

"Do you mean here in this house?"

"Yes, missy."

"But he was to at once leave the country, Hickory," anxiously said the young girl, a dread seizing upon her that after all Merton Granger might be recaptured.

"I know, missy; but he concluded to come here and hide a few days, and then go out of the country in disguise, as he could think of some good way of leaving."

"Then, if he had gone, and his horse was found missing, they would have come upon me, he said."

"So he came here, to the secret chamber, which is in this old house, and is hiding there now."

"As they whipped me so bad I could not move, and I didn't wish to trust anybody with the secret, I sent Boston after you, missy."

"I am so glad that you did, Hickory; but where is Cousin Merton?"

"In the secret chamber, missy, in the north wing, and I'll tell you how to get there; but you must be back before Boston comes with the things I sent for, and which I wish you would please take to master."

"There is some wine in the partry, which those wicked men did not get, and you might take it to him now."

"There's a lamp on the table yonder, missy, which please light to take with you, as this is too big to carry, and I'm sorry I can't help you, missy, but I hain't able."

"Don't fret about that, poor good Hickory, for I will do all you wish."

"Now I'll get the lamp and light it, then the wine and you must tell me how to reach this secret chamber, which I never heard of before."

"Only master and me knows of it, missy," and as Hickory spoke Lucille glided away down the hall.

In a short while she returned with a small hand lamp, and a basket, in which were several bottles of wine.

"Now, missy, go up-stairs to the north spare room, and on the right side of the fireplace you'll find the large panel to be a door leading into the secret chamber."

"It has a bird carved upon it, and if you press the bird hard the door will open, for there is a spring lock under it."

"I will find it all right; but how strange that I did not know of this before, and I am sure that Uncle Dean and Aunt Ruth did not."

"No, missy; but don't stay too long, for you must be back before Boston comes, but then I will send him off on another errand, so you can take master the food, and missy, if you could manage to ride over to-morrow and bring him something from Valley View, or send it, as if for me, I'd be obliged, for he mustn't starve."

"No, indeed, Hickory, and Mam' Phillis shall fix up a basket each day, which I will bring myself, for you are unable to take it to him, and no one else, not even Boston, must be trusted.

"And I won't forget you, Hickory, with good things, too."

"Lor' bless you, missy, for you is so good, but you had better go now."

Taking up her lamp and basket Lucille ascended the broad stairs to the floor above.

Many a young girl, in that large old mansion, dark except for the little lamp she carried, and the one on the table in the hall near Hickory, would not have ventured what she did.

But Lucille Gazzam was of a fearless nature, as has been shown, and no dread was upon her.

Opening the door of the spare room, which had been invaded by the searchers that afternoon, Lucille entered and closed it behind her.

She saw that the blinds were closed, that shut out the light from being seen from without, and then she crossed to the panel.

Placing her lamp upon the mantle, and her basket upon the floor, she pressed hard upon the bird carved in the mahogany, and which was an artistic piece of work which she had often admired.

There was a slight give to the touch, a click, and the panel turned upon an invisible spring.

Knocking lightly, she was suddenly confronted, as the reader has seen, by Merton Granger, who started back in amazement at beholding her there.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

"LUCILLE, in Heaven's name how came you here?"

Such was the salutation which the young girl received when Merton Granger gazed upon her as she stepped through the open panel.

"Hickory sent for me, Cousin Merton, to come to you, as he was unable to do so, and I have a strange story to tell you, and a sad one," answered Lucille, and she at once made known all that had occurred, not only at Mistletoe Manor and the severe whipping of Hickory, but also of the search for him, and that she had told that she had set him free.

Through all Merton Granger listened with a face set and stern, while something like a bitter imprecation escaped his lips as he heard of the cruelty shown to Hickory.

"Poor old man, he has a noble heart in him, and would have died, I well know, rather than betray me.

"And his plan to get me food through you, Lucille, was just like him, for in spite of his sufferings he thought of me.

"But I like not this causing trouble and pain to others, and it appalls me to feel what you have risked, and are risking, for my sake, and I must go far from here, and at once."

"You cannot do so to-night, Cousin Merton; but I will be far happier when you have gone, and I know that you are safe, and I will hunt up a disguise for you of some kind, so that you can depart to-morrow night."

"Ah! I have it, for there are a number of old costumes here in the store-room, gotten when we had a mask ball upon my twenty-first birthday anniversary, and among them you can get one which will suit me well, for I will cut off my mustache, and there is a wig of long hair, with blue spectacles, and the odd suit of an itinerant parson, which I know will just suit me.

"I can mount a mule and thus leave the country, going to Baltimore, where I can take a vessel to a foreign port, when I will decide what it is best for me to do.

"Come, let us seek the store-room and secure the suit I refer to, for Boston will not return for some little time yet."

He took up the lamp which Lucille brought and started to leave the room.

As he did so she handed to him his pistol, which lay upon the table, saying quietly:

"Take this, Cousin Merton, for you know not what you may have to face."

Was it a presentiment of evil that caused her to hand him that pistol, a looking into the future with prophetic eyes?

Who can tell?

He took the weapon and moved out of the secret chamber, across the spare room, Lucille following him.

The store-room was in the attic, and he was advancing toward the stairs, lamp in hand, when suddenly the door of the bed-chamber opened and a man confronted him.

It was one of the searching party, who had drank most deeply and had wandered off to find a place to sleep off the effects, thinking the crowd would not leave the mansion for some hours.

He was also one of the jurymen who had condemned Merton Granger as a murderer.

He started at suddenly seeing Merton Granger before him, and stepping back rubbed his eyes, for he had just risen from his bed and was hardly awake, while he had opened a window to see where he was, and had started to grope his way down the stairs and out of the mansion in the darkness, for he had awakened sober and realized where he was.

The moment that he beheld the fugitive it came to his mind that Merton Granger had after all been concealed in the house and was making his escape, the crowd having departed.

He was armed and meant to win fame by capturing or killing the escaped prisoner then and there.

"He saw also Lucille, and thought he saw through the whole plot.

Instantly he threw his pistol forward and cried:

"Merton Granger surrender to me, or I will kill you."

"Throw down that weapon, Dancy, or I will kill you, for it is your life or mine," came the stern response of the sailor who took in the situation at a glance, though he had at first thought that he had run upon some of the searchers recently left in the mansion to capture him, should he be there.

"Never! you shall die," and with the words Dancy fired.

But the pistol of Merton Granger flashed almost as soon, and the aim was true, while the bullet of his foe shattered the lamp in his hand.

In the darkness, Merton Granger heard a fall.

He was sure of his aim, yet feared that Lucille might also have been hit, so called out:

"Lucille!"

"Here I am, Cousin Merton; but is this not horrible?"

"Horrible, indeed, my child; but give me your hand, and I will lead you to the stairs, when you can go down to the hall and relieve Hickory's mind about the shot."

"And you, Cousin Merton?"

"Oh! there are lamps in the rooms here, and I will light one and return to my retreat."

"And—the—body?" she asked, in a whisper.

"I will attend to that, my child; but you have a secret of awful import to keep."

"I can keep it; but now let me go down to where Hickory is."

He led her to the stairs, where a light was visible from the hall below, and entering a bedroom, soon had a lamp lighted, with which he returned to the rear corridor, where the tragedy had been enacted.

His lamp lay scattered about on the floor, and on the threshold of the door, leading into the room out of which he had come, lay Dancy, the ex-jurymen.

"He is stone-dead—my bullet entered his brain," said Merton Granger, calmly, and raising the body in his arms, he bore it to the secret chamber, and there left it.

Then he returned and cleared away the particles of the lamp, which fortunately had only its chimney and globe broken.

These pieces he also bore to the secret chamber, which he had just entered when the door opened and Lucille appeared, having bravely come up in the darkness.

She bore in her hands a tray, upon which the culinary skill of Boston's wife had placed a tempting supper supposed to be for Hickory.

"Here, Cousin Merton, Boston brought this, and Hickory sent him back, on another errand, so I must be there when he returns, so please take the food, as I have to take the dishes back."

She spoke hurriedly, and Merton saw that she was excited.

"You brave, noble girl, I do not know what to say to you for all that you have done for me.

"But you must go now, and day after to-morrow ride over and you will find that I have gotten away in safety.

"You may expect to hear from me in some way, when I am in safety, and I wish you to feel that I shall try to clear up this stain upon me, this damning charge that I am guilty of murder, and prove who is the guilty one.

"Now, my dear little one, don't fret about me, and be brave and strong and all will come well."

"But it?"

"What?"

"His body."

"Ah! I have removed the body from the hall, and, after you have gone shall take it out and bury it.

"What did Hickory say?"

"He was alarmed and was trying to come to you, when I went back."

"Noble soul; but tell him I will see him when you have started home.

"Now, Lucille, kiss me good-by, and keep our secret; but, if it worries you, make a clean breast of it to Uncle Dean and take his advice as to what is best.

"It was Dancy's life or mine, and I live while he is dead."

"I will keep the secret, Cousin Merton; but good-by, now."

She held up her pretty mouth for a kiss, and a moment after had gone, and Merton Granger was left alone in the secret chamber with the body of the man he had slain—a fugitive, a hunted man, one upon whom the shadow of the gallows rested, alone with his own bitter thoughts.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SAILOR'S VOW.

For a few moments after the departure of Lucille Gazzam, Merton Granger remained silent and thoughtful.

"What a fearful responsibility I have brought upon this beautiful child," he murmured.

"But is she a child?"

"Is she not rather a woman?"

"Though but fifteen years of age, she has the nerve of a strong man, the heart and soul of a woman.

"And I have put upon her this fearful ordeal she is passing through.

"Ah, me! I would that I could protect her from it.

"But I must to work, for there is much to do."

So saying he left the secret chamber and slowly descended the main stairway leading into the grand hall.

The lamp burned brightly there, and he beheld the cot on which lay Hickory, moaning with pain and his inability to aid his master in his time of greatest need.

"Hickory!"

"Oh, master! have you come here?" and the negro held forth his hand and Merton Granger pressed it warmly.

"Yes, for I have killed Richard Dancy, Hickory, and must bear his body away and bury it."

"Master, he must have wandered into some of the rooms while he was drunk, and thus come upon you, from what Missy Lucille told me."

"Yes, and it was his life or mine.

"Had I been alone I would have sprung upon him and tested a struggle for mastery, rather than kill him; but I would not risk his going, or killing me and thus bringing censure upon little Lucille, so I fired to kill, and now I must bury him."

"Yes, master, and it would be best to open the grave of old Ned, whom we buried only yesterday, for it would not attract attention."

"A good idea, Hickory, and I will do so.

"I will find a shovel and spade in the tool-house?"

"Yes. And I wish I could help you."

"Ah, no, for you have far more than done your share for me; but Hickory, I swear by high Heaven that vengeance, just though cruel, shall follow.

"I take oath, old man, to punish those guilty men and avenge every blow you have

received and the wrongs heaped upon me, and I am not a man to make an idle threat or take a false oath," and the voice of Merton Granger quivered as he spoke, while his whole form shook with emotion.

Never had Hickory seen him so moved, and he was fairly startled at the intense excitement of his master.

"Why, master, you fairly scare me, sah," he said, as he gazed into his livid face and burning eyes.

"I mean not to, good Hickory; but I am crushed and maddened by all that has happened."

"I gave up an honorable position, where I held rank and was winning fame, to come to my dying father."

"I came to find him dead and others in my home."

"True, they yielded at once to my claim; but somehow I felt that I was almost taking from them what they considered their own, through my supposed death."

"Because I felt grief for my father's death, because the story he left for me to know about himself, my mother, and myself, hurt me to the quick, and I held myself aloof from the people, they called me proud and hated me, as they had him when, grieving over his own sorrows he too had not mingled with them."

"And, possessed of riches as I am, with honor only in my heart, no stain upon my name, I am accused of murder, hounded down, abused and sentenced to die upon the gallows."

"Freed by that lovely girl, and by your aid, Hickory, I am forced to fly for my life, hide like a hunted wolf, have my home searched and despoiled, and you, my noble friend, whipped out of revengeful feelings toward me, until they have nearly killed you."

"Now I am forced to fly and hide myself to save my neck from the hangman's noose."

"Ah! but I will reap revenge for all this, and there shall be louder groans among those men than they have wrung from your lips, Hickory, and where Richard Dancy has been Number One, there are others to follow him, for I have vowed it, yes, taken solemn oath, as I stood there by his body up-stairs just now, that a day of retribution shall come, and a sad day it will be for those who have wronged us."

While Merton Granger spoke, he had walked to and fro in the hall like a caged tiger.

His eyes had seemed to burn, so fierce was the light in them, and his lips trembled with emotion.

Hickory gazed at him with amazement and alarm.

He had known his young master from boyhood to manhood, and never had he seen him display such intensity of passion.

But, with a great effort at self-control, Merton Granger calmed himself and said, quietly:

"But how are you, good Hickory?"

"Do you suffer much, and can I do anything to relieve your pain?"

"No, master, I am getting along all right, sah, and Boston is taking good care of me."

"But, master, don't delay, sah, in burying the body, for Boston will be back in little more than an hour. I told him to go all the way with Missy Lucille, to the very door of Phillis's cabin, so as to see she was safe."

"If he comes, sah, while you are out at the graveyard, I'll send him to his cabin for something, so that he won't see you, for though he is true, master, I don't wish you to take any chances."

"You are right, Hickory, so I will go at once."

So saying, Merton Granger cautiously left the house and went to get the tools needed for burying the body of Richard Dancy.

He soon returned, and going up to the secret chamber brought the body down, passing out by the negro without a word.

With the tools and the body, he had a heavy load to carry; but he was a man of remarkable strength, and went on at a quick pace across the lawn, through the woodland, and then across a field to the little cedar grove, where was the slaves' burying-ground of the Mistletoe Plantation.

There was the new-made grave of an old negro who had been buried the day before, and this he hastily began to open.

He worked hard and rapidly, and soon had it deep enough to place the body therein.

He had taken from the clothes of the dead man all that he could find in the way of valuables, and put them away in the secret chamber.

Then he had muffled about the form a blanket, and, enveloped in this, the body was placed in the grave, a foot above the coffin of the old negro.

The hands were crossed upon the breast, the blankets carefully tucked about the form, and then the dirt was thrown in once more and the grave carefully smoothed over as before.

Taking the tools back to their place, Merton Granger once more went to the mansion.

Listening, he was certain that Hickory was alone, and entering the hall the old negro told him that Boston had returned, having seen Lucille safely back to the cabin of Aunt Phillis, and then had been sent home to get some sleep, as Hickory told him he would not need him until morning.

"Hickory, I shall start at once, for delays are dangerous, and I will have three hours of night before it is dawn."

"Then it would be as much more before pursuit could be commenced, and with such a start I would readily be able to escape."

"I shall cut off my mustachios, wear a wig, goggles and deacon's suit, which are in the store-room, and readily pass for a traveling parson, while your mule, which is a fleet animal if urged to his speed, and of great endurance, will carry me at a rapid rate."

"Master, it will be better, sah, and if the mule is missed, I will tell them I loaned him to somebody."

"Then I will go and get him ready at once, for I suppose he is in the stables?"

"Yes, sah, and his saddle and bridle hangs on the peg near him."

Leaving the mansion again, Merton Granger went to the stables, saddled and bridled the mule, a large and splendid animal, which Planter Granger had given to Hickory a year before, and hitching him in a thicket near the house, he returned to prepare for his flight.

He was up-stairs for over half an hour, getting ready, and when he came down into the hall Hickory started, for the metamorphosis of his master was so great he would never have known him.

A few words of parting, a letter left for Lucille, and Merton Granger had left his home, a fugitive from the gallows, and become a wanderer upon the earth.

But in the heart of the fugitive sailor was a vow to one day be avenged upon his cruel persecutors, and that vow he hoped had been registered as one to be faithfully kept by him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THWARTED BY A GIRL.

THE news of the visit of those who had searched for Merton Granger to Mistletoe Manor, and the severe punishment administered upon poor Hickory, soon got abroad, and there were many good people who felt that the enemies of the young sailor were carrying matters too far, going ahead with too high a hand.

That Merton Granger had escaped the gallows, many were glad of, for a number doubted his guilt, in spite of the dying charge made by old Planter Duval that he was his murderer.

It had been discovered that he was not in debt, as had been said, and his record in the navy had been second to that of no man.

He had not needed money, and why he had killed Mr. Duval, who had made his will in his favor, people who thought about it could not understand, as he would have gotten all at no distant date.

It came out also that he had made his will in favor of Lucille Gazzam, so that that young lady, early in her teens, became a marked personage in the neighborhood.

She had, as was said, a snug fortune left her by her parents, of which Leslie Dean was the trustee.

Then came Planter Duval's fortune given her, and if Merton Granger died, as much more, which, all together, would make the wealthiest young lady in the country.

Beautiful in face, with a budding form

that promised to be the perfection of grace and feminine loveliness, bright and fascinating, she was at once the cynosure of all eyes and of course scores of beaux already hovered in sight.

She had made herself a heroine by her rescue of Merton Granger, and added to it by confessing her act and stating that she alone was the guilty one, if guilt there was in her deed.

Thus the severe whipping given to Hickory, whom all liked, was cried down on all sides, and a revolution of feeling began to set in which favored Merton Granger's innocence, in spite of the damning evidence that pointed to his guilt.

After the flight of the young sailor, and his escape was assured, Leslie Dean decided that, as Lucille was the heiress, should death come to Merton Granger, they would move into Mistletoe Manor.

Mr. Dean and his son seemed to have a fond liking for the grand old house, which, if felt by Mrs. Dean also, she did not so express herself.

Their cottage was a lovely one, comfortable and charming as an abiding place, while they had horses, carriages and boats in the little harbor on the bay for their pleasure.

Still Mr. Dean and Nevil preferred the grandeur of Mistletoe Manor, with its dozen halls, half a dozen wings and two-score rooms, all superbly furnished.

Then, too the superb silver service and other luxuries of Mistletoe were to be desired.

The stables were full of horses, the vehicles the best, the grounds were magnificent, and down in the little harbor on the bay was a small yacht and a number of boats, while half a score of servants were connected with the mansion, ready to do the slightest bidding of the occupants.

With all these temptations, Mr. Dean made no attempt at resistance, and, after a talk with his son Nevil, it was decided to move into Mistletoe again, and close up the cottage.

So he said one morning at breakfast:

"Wife, now that Merton has gone, and will never dare return home, I have decided to move to Mistletoe and live, for, as Lucille is its heiress, she will be there when she arrives at the age when she will take charge, or marry," and Leslie Dean gave a significant glance toward his son Nevil, as he spoke of Lucille's marrying.

The wife of Leslie Dean was as putty in his hands, for she always did what her husband demanded of her.

And so she said in her low, sad tone:

"You know best, Leslie."

But all were startled by suddenly hearing from Lucille, whose face flushed with anger, while she said warmly:

"No, Uncle Dean, we must not move to Mistletoe."

"And why not?" asked the astonished guardian, while Nevil also raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Because Mistletoe does not belong to you or to me."

"Tut, tut, child, it is just as surely ours, I mean yours, as though you were of age and Merton were dead."

"When Cousin Merton is dead, and I know it, I shall move to Mistletoe, as he has been so good as to make me his heiress; but I certainly shall not do so until then, and Hickory must remain in charge."

"Why, Lucille, do you intend to dispute my authority?" angrily asked Mr. Dean.

"In this case, yes, Uncle Dean."

"Why, Lucille, you are really insolent to father," said Nevil.

"I meant not to be; but I certainly have a voice in this matter, if I am but a child, and Cousin Merton's home shall be sacred from intrusion until I know his wishes regarding it."

"Bah! you are a silly child, and I want no more of this; so get ready to move to Mistletoe at once."

"I will not, and if you attempt to do so, Uncle Dean, I shall go to Lawyer Clemmons and see if the law cannot restrain you from so doing."

Mr. Dean was a very angry man, and Nevil gazed at his adopted cousin with surprise.

But Lucille did not flinch.

She was not angry, but indignant, and

firm as a rock in her resolve to have her way.

"Do you know aught of Merton's wishes in this matter, Lucille, for you were the last one to see him?" and Mr. Dean spoke with something of a sneer in his tone.

"No, sir; in fact he might wish for us to be there, but without knowing this, I shall not go."

"And I shall."

"Uncle Dean, do not rouse me to contest your right to do so, for I certainly shall, if you insist."

"Girl, I shall send you to a convent, for you are getting unmanageable."

"Because you have become something of a heroine you are spoilt."

"Uncle Dean, my mother was not a Roman Catholic, but a Protestant, and if you will remember, her will stated how and where I was to be educated."

"I have not sought to be a heroine, but simply saved Cousin Merton from dying on the gallows for a crime I feel sure he never committed, and I will not let you move into Mistletoe, for there are, I now recall, trustees besides yourself appointed to carry out the will of the master of Mistletoe, and to them I shall appeal, if you insist."

Leslie Dean felt that he was checkmated, and by a girl.

He knew that public opinion would not sustain him in moving into Mistletoe against the wishes of the young girl who certainly had the right to say that he should not do so, and he wished no scandal to fall upon him, so he yielded, when his wife said with a warning look:

"Leslie, I think we had better remain here."

"All right, let the stubborn girl have her way, though I fear we will be ruled by her hereafter."

"I will gladly remove myself out of the way, Uncle Dean, if you find me a disagreeable charge."

"Ah, I have it! The Willows was left to me by that dear good old gentleman, Planter Duval, who I know never meant to make such a mistake as he did, and accuse Cousin Merton of being his murderer, and I can have it fitted up and go there to live with a governess."

"I can secure a married lady as governess, and her husband can manage the place."

"Will it not be a good idea, Aunt Ruth?"

Leslie Dean muttered an oath, and Nevil fairly gasped for breath.

They knew that the terms of Roderick Duval's will allowed the heiress to take possession at once, if she wished.

Mr. Dean was guardian to the young girl's property, by the terms of her mother's will rather than of her person, and the thought of losing her was something he cared not to tolerate for an instant.

But Lucille held the whip hand, and he knew it, and so he began to temporize, and the result was that the Deans did not move to Mistletoe Manor, nor did the young heiress set herself up as mistress of The Willows.

CHAPTER XXXII.

REVEALED BY A LETTER.

"He has gone, missy."

"And safe?"

"Yes, missy."

"When did he go?"

"Just about an hour before dawn, missy."

"How?"

"He took my mule, and Lordy! you should have seen him, Missy Lucille, for he did look that like a Me'odist preacher that nobody would know the difference."

"I am so glad, Hickory."

"And so am I, missy; but you should just have seen Merton in his disguise!"

"Sad as it was, and suffering, too, I had to laugh, for he'd shaved off his French mustaches, and had a wig of long, straight hair, while green goggles hid his eyes, and his long-tailed coat was so funny!"

"They'll ask him to preach, missy, if he don't hide himself on Sunday," and Hickory laughed, while Lucille heartily joined him, for she appreciated the ludicrous description of the escaped prisoner, attired as an itinerant parson.

But her face soon grew serious once more, and she asked:

"And how are you to-day, Hickory?"

"Better, missy, thank you."

"I could not come yesterday, but I got off to-day, and I made a raid on the larder of Aunt Ruth, for I did not know but that Cousin Merton was still here; but the good things come in just as well for you, so I will leave the basket here for you, and I'll remember you each time I come over."

"You are so good, Missy Lucille."

"No, Hickory, I'm only human, and a young girl; but I happen to have a good heart and active brain; but tell me, did Boston know that Cousin Merton was hiding here?"

"No, indeed, missy."

"And did he bury the body?" and Lucille spoke in a whisper.

"Yes, missy, and he left this letter for you."

"I thank you, Hickory, and she placed the letter in the pocket of her riding-habit."

Then she said:

"Hickory, last night I heard Uncle Dean and Nevil talking together about coming here to live."

"I was in the hammock on the piazza, and they were in the library, so I heard all."

"But they shall not do it, Hickory."

"No, missy, it would be better if they do not."

"Somehow I dread to come here, with the worry of that scene up-stairs the other night, and I will fight against it."

"But I must be starting home now; but I will come over when I can, and I will see Lawyer Clemmons so that you will remain in charge of the mansion and plantation, and I know all will go well."

"But do you not wish me to send Doctor Hunter to see you?"

"No, missy, thank you, for the old people here know the healing nature o' herbs, and they are looking after me, and I guess I'll be able to get around in a week or so."

"Then make Boston stay here with you at night and I will not forget him for it."

So saying Lucille bade the negro good-by and mounting her beautiful horse, Bolt, dashed away down the gravel drive.

Reaching the massive gateway leading into the grounds about the mansion, she came to a halt and took out her letter.

Breaking the seal she read the contents, which were as follows:

"MY DEAR LUCILLE:—

"My words would never express to you the thanks I feel for all that you have done for me."

"You are the bravest little woman I ever knew, and, if harm befalls me, I will feel that I have but done my duty in making you my heiress as I have."

"In kindred ties perhaps Aunt Ruth should have my property; but I had a long talk with her one day, and she begged me by all the love I might hold for her, not to leave her, or hers one dollar of my wealth."

"She seemed strangely in earnest, and convinced me that she meant what she asked of me."

"In fact she made me promise not to do so, and to keep this promise from all others."

"But to you I make it known."

"It was the night after this talk with her that I was arrested as the murderer of that poor old man, Roderick Duval, who, through some strange hallucination saw in me his slayer."

"You believe me guiltless, so I need not vow to you by all that I hold sacred, that I am not guilty of that crime."

"Had I been, I would never have shunned my fate on the gallows."

"But I accepted the freedom which your courage gave to me, and I now go forth in the world for a purpose."

"What that purpose is you will one day know."

"I bear with me ample funds, for I happened to have in my desk, at the time of my arrest, a large sum which the thoughtfulness of Hickory saved for me, for he took it, along with some private papers, and hid all for me in the secret chamber."

"I shall not suffer, therefore, for funds, so do not worry about me, for I can take care of myself, now that you have given me the chance to do so."

"I will communicate with you, if I can do so some time, to assure you that I am well; but in case of my death, I will have arranged that full proof of it will be given to you and to my lawyers."

"Within I send a letter from my lawyer in Baltimore."

"It was in reference to a debt claimed to be owed by my father, but which he made no mention of."

"It was this which added to the evidence against me at my trial, along with my partially written answer."

"Give the letter to Lawyer Clemmons, and tell him to investigate the debt, and if convinced that it is a rightful one, to pay it out of the income of Mistletoe."

"Say to him, also, to place in the hands of my Baltimore attorneys half of this year's income from the estate, subject to my demand on them for the money should I need it, which I may do, though I hardly think I shall."

"You see that I make a business woman of you, as well as my heroine; but I have great confidence that I could not place my affairs in better hands."

"Remember, if I die, you shall be my heiress."

"If I do not return, with proof of my innocence,

within six years from the date of my flight to-night, you are to have full possession of Mistletoe and all its belongings, and my other properties, and I shall so draw up papers to leave with my attorney."

"You will then have reached the age of twenty-one, and should I not have proven my innocence by that time, then I will be as dead to all the world, even though I should live, and you are the only one to enjoy my fortune, for it shall be wholly your own."

"Again let me tell you, my dear Lucille, that I feel all that you have done for me, and more; become what I may, roam where I will, can you be out of my memory? for, as in a sacred casket, I will enshrine your sweet image in my heart."

"Farewell, and for the pain and worry I have put upon you, the bitter memories which I have forced you to bear, in the dark secret between us, forgive me, and pray that out of darkness light shall come."

"Affectionately, MERTON GRANGER."

Was it a wonder that Lucille read this letter over and over again?

Was it a wonder that the tears dropped from her eyes upon the written lines blurring them, as she sat there in her saddle?

Was it a wonder that she placed the letter away in her bosom, and murmured:

"I will do all as he tells me."

It was a revelation to her, child though she was, that she loved.

She loved one who was no school-boy, but much older than herself, one who had been a man of the world, and her childish heart was awaking to the fact that it was no affection, such as she might have felt for a handsome boy, or young hero.

What that love was to bring to her in the future this romance will show.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PIRATES' NEST.

THE fugitive sailor found no difficulty in passing muster as an itinerant preacher.

His make-up was good, though it had been found in the store-room of Mistletoe Manor, and Merton Granger had ever been a good amateur actor and mimic, so the drawl which he assumed was an exact imitation of some good missionary, who like many good men of to-day, appear to think that a sing-song doleful whine is necessary to the perfection of Christianity in a minister.

Arriving at Baltimore Merton Granger sold his mule for a good price and sending for a lawyer, drew up certain legal papers which he wished to be given into the hands of his own attorneys, whom he did not care to visit, as they might already have heard of his being a fugitive from the gallows.

Though assured that they would not betray him, he yet wished not to place them in a position to compromise them by a supposed knowledge of his whereabouts.

Hence he went to a strange attorney and executed what papers he wished.

Changing his disguise, or rather discarding it, he went on to New York, from whence he determined to make a fresh start in life, having already determined upon a plan of action to govern him in the future.

To carry out this plan, or plot, to a conclusion, we will leave him, and again ask the reader to return with me to the neighborhood of Mistletoe Manor, some two months after the flight of Merton Granger to save his neck from the hangman's noose.

Situated upon one corner of the Valley View estate, which numbered some three hundred acres, was an old homestead, or rather a ruin, for it was nothing more.

It had been the real homestead of the Valley View Plantation, and had been known as The Hermitage for years, for there had dwelt an old man, his wife and son, who had kept so completely to themselves, that in time they were called The Hermits.

The old man had bought the place from a broken-down planter, who had allowed it to go to ruin, and the purchaser had done but little to repair it or build it up.

Rumor had it that the purchaser had been an old sea-captain, and some even hinted that he was a retired pirate.

He had a look of the sailor about him, for he always dressed in sea garb, and brought with him a pretty sailing craft.

A half-dozen negroes were all the servants on the place, and the lands were not tilled, but allowed to go to weeds.

In one wing of the old house the family lived and made themselves comfortable, the rest of the large house being allowed to crumble to ruin.

The servants dwelt in "a quarter" near the homestead, and all they knew about their

owners was that they had money and had bought them in South Carolina.

If their story was not true, no one could find out to the contrary.

The "Captain," as the old seaman was called, bore the name of Silas Blackstone, and he called his wife Ruby, and his son, a mere boy, Brandt.

His wife was a beautiful woman, much younger than her husband, and there were hints about that she had been a captive of "the old pirate."

But of course this was only talk, surmising that the old sailor had been a pirate.

He was certainly an educated man, was Captain Silas Blackstone, and he taught his son at home.

The boy was a handsome, dashing fellow, with a greater love for his yacht, boat, gun and horses, than for books; but still he did not appear to be a dull student by any means.

He seldom left the place, and his father and mother never did so, unless it was to take a sail on Chesapeake Bay.

Thus matters progressed for years, Captain Blackstone having an income, for he paid all his bills, and did not earn a dollar from the plantation.

Then it was said by the slaves, for it leaked out, that young Brandt Blackstone had had a bitter quarrel with his father, and had run away from home, though but a boy of sixteen.

Several years passed away and one night a vessel was seen to stand in toward the little harbor of The Hermitage.

It was a saucy looking craft, with an armed deck and large crew, as reported by those who had seen her coming up the Chesapeake before sunset.

Into the little harbor she glided, under the shadow of the night, and when the morning came it was discovered that she was gone.

But a horrible discovery was also made, for Captain Blackstone and his wife were found dead in their home, having been murdered, and the house had been sacked, while the half a dozen slaves had been carried off, no one knew where.

Of course it was said that the craft was a pirate, perhaps some rival buccaneer to the old captain who had avenged himself for a wrong done in the past, while others hinted that it was the son, Brandt, who had returned and murdered his parents.

But who or what was the vessel and her crew, remained in mystery, and The Hermitage was deserted and shunned by all.

Then it was discovered that the broken-down planter who had sold it to the strangers, had had no right to do so, as Planter Granger held a claim upon it, and it had been disposed of while he was wandering about the world somewhere.

So it reverted to Planter Granger, as a part of Mistletoe estate, which it joined, and he began to cultivate it.

Then it was that Leslie Dean, broken in fortune, came to live at Mistletoe, and the planter gave him the lands of The Hermitage, and, not wishing him to live in the "Haunted Hermitage," and "Pirates' Nest," as the old homestead was called, selected a beautiful site a mile away, at the head of a vale, and built the handsome home which he named Valley View.

The Hermitage was then allowed to go to ruin, while few people cared to venture nearer than a quarter of a mile of the dismal old rookery.

Beautifully situated, though it was, upon a hill that sloped down to the waters of the Chesapeake and commanded a fine view of the bay and its shores, it was yet dreaded and shunned by all, and so when at last a man came along one day and offered to purchase the old place and the half-hundred acres surrounding it, every one was surprised, and set him down as a lunatic, to live in a place filled with such dread memories.

But he offered a handsome price, and Leslie Dean accepted his offer, and the Pirates' Nest passed into other hands than his, while great curiosity to know who was the purchaser thrilled the entire community about Valley View Plantation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN ODD NEIGHBOR.

LUCILLE GAZZAM was riding slowly along the highway one day, which bordered the

shores of Chesapeake Bay, when she saw a little sloop put into the harbor near the old Pirates' Nest, and come to anchor.

She supposed it to be some fishing-smack, and so paid no more attention to it, but rode on her way, which led her past the old homestead.

Since her firm stand in not moving into Mistletoe Manor, matters had not been quite as pleasant as formerly in the home of the Deans.

There seemed a certain constraint between Leslie Dean and his ward, and Nevil had acted less cordially toward her than had been his wont.

But Mrs. Dean appeared about as usual, though she was seldom with Lucille, and between the two there never had existed the fellowship which there should have been between a young girl and one who was to act as a mother to her.

So Lucille passed a great deal of her time on horseback, or in sketching in the woods, when she was not busy with her studies and music, for Mrs. Dean was her teacher, and in this particular she was most successful.

Lucille had gone over to Mistletoe occasionally, and was glad to see that Hickory had recovered from his sufferings, and told him frankly about the scene in regard to her refusal to live at the home of Merton Granger; but she felt grieved as the months went by and no news came of the absent master.

And so the days passed on, Lucille left mostly to herself, and dependent upon her own resources for any pleasures she might have.

On the evening in question, she had ridden down the bay shore, along the road which wound around the hill upon which The Hermitage was situated.

She had heard many stories of the old homestead, and knew how fearful the negroes were of going anywhere near it.

Once on a time she had asked Mr. Dean and Nevil to go there with her, for a look over the old building, but they had refused, and so her curiosity regarding the old place had never been satisfied.

The hill upon which the ancient mansion stood, sloped gently down to the Chesapeake, broken by the highway, which ran a quarter of a mile from the house.

There was a stone wall, half tumbled down, around the woodland park surrounding the house, and the gate which led into the avenue of Lombardy poplars was broken down.

The avenue was weed-grown, and the grounds about the mansion showed long neglect.

Majestic trees were around the house, many of them stately pines, and the wind sighing among them gave forth a mournful sound whenever there was a breath of air.

Once on a time Lucille had ridden half the length of the avenue and there halted, while she sat upon her horse looking at the homestead and drawing a romance out of its history.

Now, as she rode along the highway, she halted and seemed half inclined to turn in through the tumble-down gate.

But she rode on with the remark:

"I will when I come back, for I don't see that I have anything to fear."

So she continued on down the bay road for several miles, and then started back on her return.

She noticed that the sloop was still at anchor in the Valley View Cove, and without hesitation rode up the avenue leading to The Hermitage.

She held on her way until she drew near the door, and then came to a halt.

The piazza was in a bad condition, the blinds swung loosely to and fro, a number of window-panes had been broken, and the place had desolation and decay written all over it.

Suddenly she started, for a man appeared before her, coming from around the house.

The man also started, for he was as much surprised at seeing her as she was at beholding him.

Lucille never went without her pistol, one given her by Merton Granger, and which he had taught her to become quite an expert in the use of.

Her first impulse was to run, and then she checked that thought and stood her ground.

The man was a stranger to her, and she regarded him with interest.

He was a man of fine physique and striking appearance, but the most remarkable was that his hair and beard, both worn long, were snow white, and yet they had the appearance of being prematurely gray, when his clear complexion was observed.

He wore glasses, and was well dressed, just as a countryman of the old school was wont to dress sixty years ago.

He raised his broad hat politely, at beholding Lucille, and approaching her said in a pleasant voice:

"Your servant, my dear miss, and may I ask where I can find the owner of this old rookery?"

"The owner is Mr. Leslie Dean, of Valley View Plantation, sir, a mile from here by the road."

"I thank you, and could you direct me there?"

"With pleasure, sir."

"Take the highway at the foot of the hill, turn to the left and keep it until Valley View comes in sight."

"Do you know the owner, miss?"

"He is my uncle, sir, or rather guardian, for I am his ward, though I call him uncle."

"Indeed, I am fortunate then, for I am anxious to purchase the old place, which I heard of through a friend, as the very place for an artist to dwell, for I am an artist, and I must say that the bits of scenery hereabout are very beautiful."

"My name is Gerald Hull, miss, and I am happy to have met in my first acquaintance, one who is so lovely."

The compliment was so given, as not to give offense; but Lucille blushed at it, and said:

"I will ride on, sir, and send the carriage to pick you up, for you seem to have no vehicle here."

"No, I arrived by a small craft an hour ago, coming down in it from the city."

"Then I will send the carriage for you, sir, and Lucille dashed off at a gallop."

Her uncle and Nevil just drove up, coming from the village, as she arrived, and after hearing her story, Mr. Dean went in the carriage himself after the stranger, for he was anxious to meet one who was willing to buy the Pirates' Nest.

He met the stranger walking leisurely along, introduced himself and invited him to drive to Valley View with him and become his guest.

The invitation was accepted, and Gerald Hull, the white-haired artist, became the purchaser, at a handsome sum of a property which Leslie Dean would almost have given away to one who knew its history.

After the bargain was consummated he however told the purchaser that a tragedy had been enacted there, and people avoided it on that account.

That makes it more valuable to me, sir, for I desire to live the life of a recluse, and as for spooks, I fear them not.

"I heard of the old place, and of the magnificent bits of scenery to be found here, so ran down to see it, and I tell you frankly it more than takes my fancy, so I shall return to the city and bring my servants and baggage at once, for a few days will make the wing I shall occupy habitable, and I would not mar its decaying grandeur for the world."

That night Gerald Hull passed at Valley View, and the next day sailed for Baltimore.

But within ten days he was back again, bag and baggage, and three servants accompanied him, a negro and his wife to look after the house, and a valet, a white man.

Thus it was that the strange neighbor became domiciled at The Hermitage, and about a man who would live in that old rookery, there was much curiosity felt by the dwellers about the Pirates' Nest; but their curiosity regarding himself, Mr. Gerald Hull seemed not at all inclined to satisfy.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A STRANGE CRAFT IN THE BAY.

MATTERS in the settlement about Mistletoe Manor did not seem to be working to the satisfaction of those who dwelt thereabout.

In the first place, the murder of old Planter Duval had cast a gloom over the community.

Then the arrest and conviction of the master of Mistletoe as the murderer, was a damper upon all who believed in the honor

of blue-blooded aristocracy, for to have a man like Merton Granger fall from grace for a few thousand dollars, was a painful thought.

His escape had been a joy to many, a deep regret to others, and when a young girl had accomplished it, naturally it caused a sensation.

Then followed the drunken carousal in Mistletoe Manor, and the severe punishment of the most faithful of slaves, by many who should have known better, and who, many of them, were prominent in the affairs of the county.

This created a scandal, and made bad blood among many.

That Lucille Gazzam, a girl of fifteen, with a fortune of her own, and a stranger in the neighborhood, comparatively, had been made the heiress of one of the finest estates in the country, and her prospective of Mistletoe, was a cause of ungenerous comment and regret.

The remarkable disappearance of Richard Dancy was another thorn in the side of the community, and no one could extract it to their satisfaction.

He had been county treasurer, and was a most popular man, up to the time of his mysterious disappearance.

It was remembered by those at Mistletoe, in the search for the fugitive sailor, that Richard Dancy drank heavily, and after that no one recalled seeing him.

He had failed to return home at night, and the next day there was a search made for him.

A party went to Mistletoe, but Hickory was found lying on his cot keeping home, and suffering from his lashing and could tell them nothing of him.

He remembered, he said, to have seen him at the mansion, and more he did not say.

When his accounts were looked into it was found that he was a defaulter for all that was placed in his hands, and so the community felt sure that he had run off to escape punishment for his crimes, and his family were not the only ones who grieved over his departure, for he left many creditors to bewail him.

The purchase of The Hermitage by an odd personage was also cause for comment and anxiety in the neighborhood, and thus it was that the people had much to think over and talk about in the happenings of the past year within a twenty-mile circuit of Mistletoe Manor.

No word had come from the fugitive master, and yet the plantation, under the charge of Hickory, with Lawyer Clemmons as agent, went on as smoothly as though Merton Granger were present.

Thus matters stood when one day a strange craft was reported as hovering about Chesapeake Bay, in the vicinity of Mistletoe Manor and the adjacent plantations on the coast.

The craft was described as a schooner, with raking masts, and a long, lean hull that denoted speed and sea-worthiness in a marked degree.

She was unarmed though she looked the cruiser, and carried no flag whatever.

Her hull was painted black, excepting a scarlet ribbon that ran around her waist, and her figurehead was a striking one, being a beautiful figure representing Justice, grasping in one hand a pair of scales, in the other a flaming sword.

Her sails were snow-white, and her masts and spars were painted white, presenting a striking contrast to her intensely black hull.

Upon her deck were visible a dozen seamen, clad in black jackets and duck pants, and wearing scarlet skull-caps, giving the idea that her colors were red, black and white.

Under sail or at anchor, for she had been seen anchored off-shore, she was a weird-looking, but beautiful craft, and the mystery was what she was doing in those waters.

She had never been seen to communicate with the shore, and it was noted by those who had watched her, that she went by other craft that happened to be sailing her way as though they were at anchor.

A Government boat she certainly was not, and if a merchant craft she would not be cruising about as though for pleasure.

So she was set down as a pleasure-craft, a yacht belonging to some gentleman of wealth who thus chose to pass his days.

Since the coming of Gerald Hull, the ar-

tist, to The Hermitage, Lucille had often extended her rides in the direction of the old home, her dread of it having left her.

She had hopes that the artist would some day invite her in, for she frequently saw him walking in the avenue, and she would have a glance at his art treasures, for she was naturally an artist, and longed to see them.

He visited Valley View at times, and was wont to give her a few lessons in art, while he discussed the many rare specimens that he had, but yet he never, as all hoped, invited them to visit him.

He met other people, but though he would go to their homes, they too were never asked to come to his, and thus he got the reputation of being a very odd character.

He had a riding horse, an old chaise, and an animal to draw it, a light wagon and a mule for marketing, several cows, and thus ended his property in a living direction.

His valet was, as has been said, a white man, and a quiet, stolid fellow who kept his own counsel, while the old negro and negress were wont to drive to town together and to church on Sundays in the market wagon, and appeared to be willing to be sociable among the other blacks.

But as dwellers in The Hermitage, they were regarded with some suspicion by the other negroes and avoided generally.

One afternoon as Lucille was riding along the bay road, which wound around the Hermitage Hill, she saw for the first time the strange craft which had created so much comment along the coast.

It was anchored in the Hermitage Cove, which was comfortably sheltered by the trees upon the banks, and she would never have discovered her had she not gone down to the shore to ride Bolt into the salt water for a footbath, as she often did.

She drew rein quickly, as she beheld the schooner at anchor in the little cove, and not a cable's length from the shore.

A glance told her that it was the mysterious craft about which there was so much talk, and she was fairly startled at beholding it so near her.

She saw men upon her decks, but drew back quickly, as she felt that they had not seen her.

Peering through the foliage she discerned a boat half drawn out upon the beach, at a point a hundred yards distant, and near it stood two persons.

One of them was a man in the sailor garb worn by the schooner crew, a scarlet cap, black jacket and white trousers.

The other was Gerald Hall, the white-haired artist.

As Lucille beheld them they parted, the sailor returning to his boat, and the artist walking away by a path leading through the woods to the highway.

Lucille knew where the path would bring him out, and so rode on to lead him off, as though by accident.

She calculated well.

"Ah, Miss Lucille, I am glad to see you, and I would have been glad had you beheld an artistic scene a while ago.

"See here, is not this pretty, and it is of a strange craft that put into the cove last night, and in my morning walk I discovered her and got permission to make this drawing."

He took a sketch from his portfolio and handed it to her.

It was a pretty view of the cove, with the schooner at anchor upon its restful waters, and a vista beyond, through the fringed inlet of the restless Chesapeake.

Lucille had believed that the strange artist had been in some way connected with the mysterious craft; but now she was convinced that she was wrong, and admired the sketch immensely, for it was really very beautiful in its execution and subject.

"What is the vessel, Mr. Hull, that is anchored in the cove?" she asked, after admiring the sketch and returning it to him.

"Ah, you have seen her, then?"

"Yes, only a few moments ago."

"I could get no satisfaction from her skipper, with whom I had a talk regarding her, Miss Lucille.

"She has a suspicious look, though, and yet I need not dread her, as there is nothing in my old rookery to tempt a pirate, if such she should be; but houses such as Valley View and Mistletoe Manor would afford rich

raiding, if such be the nature of the vessel; but I may wrong her after all."

"Yes, for looks often deceive; but have you made many sketches of scenery about here, Mr. Hull?"

"Yes, quite a number."

"I should so like to see them," and Lucille hoped for an opportunity to do so.

But instead the artist said:

"Some day you shall see all the work I have done here, Miss Lucille. Good evening," and Gerald Hull passed on, and Lucille returned home and related how she had seen the strange craft.

That night there was that happened in the neighborhood which caused a thrill of terror to fill every heart, and the suspicion of all at once turned upon the mysterious craft seen anchored on the coast.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE KIDNAPPERS.

THE night following the day on which Lucille had discovered the strange schooner in the cove near the Hermitage, settled down dark and rainy.

People who were not forced to leave their homes, remained in-doors, and the pattering of the rain inviting sleep, many retired early.

Along a highway leading to the village, situated some miles distant from Valley View Plantation, a body of horsemen were moving slowly along.

They seemed not to heed the elements, and were enveloped in heavy cloaks that sheltered them completely.

There were in the group five horsemen, and there was one riderless horse.

They passed along the road leading by Valley View Plantation, and continuing on at a steady pace, reached the village about midnight.

Not a word was spoken, and the one who rode in advance seemed to know the country well.

It was the little village where Merton Granger had been tried and found guilty, and the six hundred souls who comprised it were in deep repose, with few exceptions, for all was wrapped in total darkness except here and there, where some one was watching by a sick bed, a glimmer of a light was seen.

Through the village the horsemen went, to at last halt before a handsome country home, surrounded by ornamental grounds, and an air of a well-to-do owner.

"This is the house—wait here."

So said the leader of the party, and the horsemen halted in the shadow of a tree, while the speaker walked forward alone.

He ascended the piazza and gave a loud knock with the heavy brass knocker.

In a few moments he knocked again, and a voice from an upper window asked:

"Well, who is it?"

"Judge Ramsey, there is a person who wishes to see you upon a case of life and death, sir, so please come down to the door."

"All right, I will be there in a few minutes," was the response from the window.

Five, ten minutes passed away, and then the door opened and Judge Ramsey appeared and looked about for his visitor.

He had brought a lamp with him and left it in the hall.

"Well, my friend, who are you?" he asked.

"Judge Ramsey, if you utter a word or offer resistance, you are a dead man."

The words were uttered in a low, stern voice, and the startled judge now beheld three men, all with pistols leveled full upon him.

He was a man of nerve, but he saw that there was not a single chance in his favor.

"Who are you?" he asked as firmly as he could.

"That you shall know full soon."

"Iron him, men, and cloak him!"

The orders were obeyed with wonderful quickness, and the judge found himself ironed, and with a huge cloak thrown about him, and the hood drawn over his head.

An instant more and a gag was forced into his mouth, and with a man upon either side of him, and one following, he was led out to the spot where the others awaited.

He was aided to mount the led horse, and

then the party rode off in the rain and darkness, going by a different road from that which they had come.

The family of the judge had not been aroused by the coming of the party of horsemen, excepting his wife, who, knowing that it was not an uncommon occurrence for her husband to be called up at night, and pitying him, did he have to go out in the storm, calmly went to sleep again.

When she awoke it was daylight, and her husband had not returned, and she wondered at this, as also the fact that he had not told her he had to leave the house.

Inquiry among the servants soon revealed that his hat had not been taken, nor had he worn his great-coat, or taken a horse from the stable.

The lamp had been found in the hall, where he had placed it, and there was no other trace of his having been called out at night.

Then search was made in the different rooms for him, but without avail, and all became thoroughly alarmed, and men were sent to the neighbors.

But the hard rain had washed away all tracks left by the horsemen and nothing as to who had come, when they had come, where they had come from and whither gone could be discussed.

The neighbors knew nothing of the strange affair, and when noon came and the judge did not return home, a general alarm was given and half a hundred horsemen turned out to solve the mystery.

From plantation to plantation went the searchers, and yet all inquiries as to what the fate of the judge had been resulted in finding no clew whatever.

The community was astounded, for all they could learn was what the wife of the judge could tell them about a man arousing him in the middle of the night and calling him down-stairs.

But for this it would have been thought that he had gone out in a moment of temporary insanity in the bay.

The hard rain had washed all tracks of the midnight visitors away, and so not a trace could be found.

And so the community was greatly excited about the affair and ready to jump at any conclusion, when a positive clew was advanced by Lucille Gazzam who spoke to one of the searchers about seeing the strange vessel in The Hermitage Cove the day before.

At once a party went to the cove.

There lay the schooner at anchor, and it was determined to find out if those on board had been in any way connected with the strange disappearance of Judge Ramsey.

A boat was accordingly procured from the Valley View Plantation, and a party selected to go on board.

Mr. Dean was made the spokesman, and the boat moved down the coast and entered the cove.

As it neared the mysterious schooner an officer hailed with:

"Ho that boat ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, sir! we would like to come on board," answered Leslie Dean, trying to give a nautical tone to his voice.

"For what purpose?"

"Well, to see your captain!"

"What do you wish with him?"

"We are planters from the neighborhood and wish to have a talk with him upon an important matter."

"Ay, ay, come alongside."

The oarsmen soon sent the boat alongside of the beautiful vessel, and Leslie Dean and his party boarded.

They were met at the gangway by a young officer, who politely asked them to state their business to him, as their captain was engaged.

Leslie Dean told what had occurred, to one of their most highly respected citizens, and said that the presence of the mysterious schooner on the coast, had given rise to a feeling that perhaps it was connected with the strange disappearance of Judge Ramsey.

The young officer smiled and said that he would state the case to his captain.

In a few minutes he returned and asked the visitors into the cabin to see the commander.

They were greeted by a tall man, clad in a uniform similar to that worn by the young

officer, only that he wore a coat instead of a jacket, and it was trimmed with silver lace.

He wore his cap, and rose and turned as the visitors entered.

His face was heavily bearded and he wore his blonde hair very long, for it fell upon his shoulders.

"Gentlemen, I am somewhat surprised at what my officer tells me is the cause of your coming on board of my vessel.

"Do you know what this schooner is?"

He spoke sternly and fixed his piercing eyes upon the face of Leslie Dean.

"No, sir, she is a mystery to us, and her presence here, without knowing why, caused us to fear that she had something to do with the disappearance of Judge Ramsey."

"As I am a stranger upon this coast, and wish to cause no suspicion, I will be most willing to have you search my vessel throughout, for if we had kidnapped your friend, we certainly would have him on board."

The sailor smiled as he spoke, and Leslie Dean and his companions felt very much embarrassed.

They had been invited on board, had met the commander of the mysterious craft and were now told to search it throughout.

They seemed to feel that they had made a mistake, and Leslie Dean said quickly:

"I beg your pardon, sir, for our suspicion of you; but the presence of your vessel on the coast the past few weeks caused us to suspect something wrong."

"But may I ask what this vessel is?"

"A schooner, sir."

"That much I see, sir, but is she a Government craft?"

"Well, no."

"What then is she?"

"A pleasure craft, for I simply cruise for my own pleasure, and liking this beautiful bay and its lovely shores, prefer to sail in these waters."

"Will you search my vessel, gentlemen?"

"Oh, no, sir, for we are satisfied."

The captain bowed, and the party, feeling their awkward situation, at once started to retreat, when Leslie Dean said:

"I would be glad, sir, to have you visit me at my home, Valley View, a couple of miles from here, if it is your pleasure to do so."

"It is not my pleasure, sir, for I seldom leave my vessel, and never to visit socially," was the cold response, and the visitors retired, more than ever impressed with the belief that the schooner was a mysterious craft, bound on some strange mission, and that her commander was a very remarkable personage, one whom it would be dangerous to trifle with.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ANOTHER MYSTERY.

THERE was one thing which Lucille Gazzam had not told in referring to the presence of the strange schooner in the cove, and that was the fact that she had seen the mysterious artist at The Hermitage in connection with an officer from on board the craft.

Somehow it came into her mind that Gerald Hull, master of The Hermitage, knew more of that schooner than he had led her to believe.

But this she determined to keep to herself, while she also meant to watch and see if she was not right in her surmise.

As she was fond of sketching and utterly fearless, she was wont often to go off on a little jaunt, sketch-book in hand, or swung to the horn of her saddle when she rode.

One day she went on one of these expeditions, and rode Bolt, her favorite horse.

Her way led to a glen not far from the cove of The Hermitage, and here she dismounted, leaving Bolt loose to feed upon the rich grass about him, for she knew that he would not leave her.

As she sat there, with a view of the cove, in which the schooner was at anchor, she suddenly saw a party of men walking toward the shore.

There were half a dozen of them walking close together and one leading, a few paces in advance.

They disappeared from sight in the timber, but soon after she beheld a boat upon the waters heading toward the mysterious schooner.

There was no mistaking the fact that those she saw in the boat were the seven men whom she had seen walking down the glen, and coming from the direction of The Hermitage, for they wore the same long cloaks which those had on.

There were two oarsmen in the boat besides, and in the uniform of the crew of the strange craft.

Watching closely, Lucille saw the men board the schooner, the boat hauled up to the davits, and a few moments after the vessel's sails were set, the anchor hove, and she stood swiftly out of the little cove.

Instantly Lucille dropped her sketching and ran to the top of the hill, when she beheld the schooner standing down the bay under a full pressure of sail.

"It is a pretty craft, Miss Lucille."

Lucille started, for she had heard the approach of no one, and yet, almost by her side stood old Gerald Hull, the artist.

"You frightened me, Mr. Hull, for I had no idea that any one was within half a mile of me," she said.

"I am sorry; but I saw you come here, so came to join you, to discover what had attracted your attention, and beheld the schooner as the object of your admiration."

"Yes; she has left the cove."

"So it seems."

"I wonder if she will return."

"I am sorry I cannot inform you, Miss Lucille, on that point."

"She certainly is a beautiful vessel, but a most mysterious one."

"Her commander seems inclined to enjoy himself after a fashion of his own, as I do, and that the good citizens hereabout seem not to like."

"They doubtless consider me a mysterious personage, Miss Lucille."

"Yes, sir, they do," was the frank reply.

The artist smiled and then asked:

"What news have you regarding Judge Ramsey?"

"None, sir."

"He has not been found, then?"

"No, sir."

"And no trace?"

"None whatever, I heard my guardian say at breakfast this morning."

"It is strange," and the artist seemed to be lost in deep thought, while Lucille, as the schooner had disappeared around a curve in the shore, said:

"I must go back to my sketching now."

He accompanied her, and, aged though his white hair and beard indicated him to be, picked up her scattered sketches for her.

Then he stood by, suggesting here and there an improvement, and Lucille was glad of the instruction she received.

After an hour of sketching she started upon her return home, and was politely lifted to the saddle by the old artist, who bowed with marked respect as she rode away, while he said:

"Whenever you wish a lesson in sketching, Miss Lucille, come here, and you will find that I am wholly at your service."

Thanking him, Lucille rode on her way home, while she said to herself:

"I really like him, but somehow I dread him, as he certainly is a most mysterious personage."

"I am sure, however, that he knows all about that schooner; but I will keep my suspicions to myself until I am certain."

From that day Lucille began to make regular visits to the glen to sketch, and almost invariably the old artist joined her there.

Sometimes he would read to her, at other times talk to her in an instructive way, and each day she felt more closely drawn to the strange man.

"I do not like him as I would my father, nor as I regard uncle, nor like Nevil."

"How is it I like him then, I wonder?"

"He is old enough to be my grandfather, and yet I am strangely drawn toward him," she said to herself.

So weeks passed by, and one day Lucille went to the glen, and, to her surprise, saw that the strange schooner had returned, and was at anchor in the cove.

The next morning she was startled by tidings brought by Nevil, who had remained all night at the village with a young man with whom he was most intimate.

That news was to the effect that Lawyer

Roger Lettingwell had disappeared from his home in the same mysterious manner that Judge Ramsey had.

As before, no one could account for it.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE KIDNAPPERS AGAIN.

THERE was a strange circumstance connected with the carrying off of Lawyer Lettingwell in its similarity to the disappearance of Judge Ramsey.

The night came on dark and stormy, and about midnight a man knocked at the pretty home of the lawyer, which was in the outskirts of the village, and asked him to come to the tavern and make a will for a dying stranger who was there.

The lawyer had enveloped himself in his storm-suit, drawn on his heavy boots, and told his servant, for he was a bachelor, that he would return in an hour or so, he supposed, and to have breakfast a couple of hours later in the morning on account of his broken rest.

Then he had gone forth in the storm accompanied by a man in a long, heavy cloak, who stood on the piazza awaiting him.

The servant had arisen at the usual hour to discover that his master had not returned.

So he walked down to the tavern to ask about him.

The landlord of the Restful Inn told him that Lawyer Lettingwell was not there, nor had he been there for several days.

There was another tavern in the place, but one of a lower order than the Restful Inn, and there the lawyer seldom went; but it might be that the dying stranger had been there.

To this the servant went to hear the same story from the landlord, and more, to learn that no dying or well stranger happened to be just then stopping there.

The now thoroughly-alarmed stranger ran to the home of the attorney's assistant, Lawyer Nicholas Greene, and made his report.

Mr. Greene was also alarmed, and at once made the mysterious affair known.

The Court-house bell was rung loudly, the citizens gathered quickly, and the same excitement followed as in the case of Judge Ramsey.

Mounted men scoured the country from plantation to plantation, and a general search was instituted.

The servant told his story, and more, he remembered that the one who came to his master was a tall man, wearing a heavy cloak that fell below his boot-tops, and a hood was drawn over his head, almost concealing his face.

Then the servant remembered to have heard hoofs splashing in the mud, and a search revealed the fact that several horses had been under a large tree in the lawyer's yard; but, though tracked to the highway, all trace was lost by the beating rain which had fallen.

Men looked at each other aghast.

What did it mean?

No one could answer this question, and one at last asked:

"Has that strange schooner been seen on the coast lately?"

No one remembered to have seen it; but it was thought advisable to ride to the coast and have a look for it.

Half a hundred men mounted for this purpose, and Lucille Gazzam, who was sketching in the glen, and Gerald Hull, the artist who was by her side, giving her instructions in her artistic work, were surprised by the sudden appearance of a large cavalcade riding almost upon them.

For some reason Lucille regretted being thus discovered, and her beautiful face flushed, as she rose to her feet from the log on which she had been sitting.

But Gerald Hull bowed in his dignified way, and was silent.

Among the party was Nevil Dean and his particular chum, Harry Edwards, with whom he had passed the night on account of the storm.

Harry Edwards was known to be a very fast youth.

A handsome one he certainly was, and men considered him dangerous, as he had been twice engaged in duels, one of which had terminated fatally, on account of his mercilessness toward his adversary.

His father was a man well to do, a mer-

chant in the village, and Harry was nominally his accountant; but the young man bullied his father, and did pretty much as he chose, telling him that as he was the only child, and he had no mother, he would get all there was to leave, and therefore preferred to spend liberally then, and not have to await the death of his indulgent parent.

"This is shameful," he muttered to Nevil, as he saw the artist and Lucille.

"It is not right in Lucille," Nevil had replied, angry at her being thus seen, for though she was not yet sixteen, and the artist appeared three-score years, he knew comment would be made upon the affair by tongues ever ready to sting with unkindness.

"It is the old man's fault, Nevil," said Harry Edwards.

"Yes."

"I would speak to him upon the subject, if I were in your place."

"Or have father."

"No, your father would not see anything in it, for he is an innocent old stick himself, as is my governor; you are the one, for, as I understand it, Miss Lucille is to be your wife some day."

"Yes."

"Well, after we have found out about this mysterious craft, we will go by the Pirates' Nest and speak to the old man."

"Yes."

And so it was decided, and the two young men rode on after their comrades, while Lucille mounted her horse and dashed homeward, angry at having been discovered in the company of the old artist.

In the mean time the party had ridden on, and reaching the shore of the cove, beheld there the mysterious schooner.

It was at once decided that a party should go on board, report the circumstance, and demand permission to search the craft, as the two mysterious disappearances had occurred while the vessel was at anchor in the cove.

A party did board the vessel, and her captain permitted them to search it; but they did not like the significant smile upon his face as they did so, nor could they read its significance.

But no discovery was made, and the searchers set off upon their return to the village, all excepting Nevil Dean and Harry Edwards.

These two went to the Pirates' Nest, as the latter still called the old home of Gerald Hull.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BITTERS BITTEN.

THE two young men who had decided to read a lecture to the old artist for giving Lucille Gazzam lessons in sketching so far away from home, and all alone in the woodland, rode up to The Hermitage together, discussing their plan of action as they did so.

There was a quiet dignity about Gerald Hull which Nevil Dean did not wish to face; but he was influenced by his companion and so had decided that the artist was to be soundly taken to task for daring to join Lucille in her sketching jaunts.

"Just tell him, Nevil, that you cannot tolerate such an act in one of his years, and that you will hold him accountable if it occurs again," said Harry Edwards, and he added:

"That will frighten him."

As to its frightening the artist, Nevil Dean was not so certain, for somehow he did not seem to consider Gerald Hull a man who would be easily startled.

But up to The Hermitage he rode with Harry Edwards, and the two were about to dismount when Gerald Hull advanced toward them.

"Well, young gentlemen, to what circumstance am I indebted for this honor?"

Both young men thought that they were able to detect a sneer in the tone of the speaker.

He did not ask them to dismount, as they had hoped, for they wished to get a look at the interior of the old rookery, but stood calmly awaiting their answer, and at the same time seeming to be regarding the faces of both with his strangely piercing eyes.

"My friend, Mr. Dean, will explain, sir,"

said Harry Edwards, and Nevil responded, as the artist bowed and turned directly upon him:

"Yes, sir, I am here to speak to you upon a subject that deeply pains me."

"Any subject that pains my young acquaintance Nevil Dean cannot but deeply interest me," and again there was the shadow of a sneer in the voice.

"We unexpectedly came upon you, Mr. Hull, half an hour or so ago, with my cousin, I may say, when she was sketching, and I wish to state to you that it is my desire that she be not molested by you when she is strolling on my lands."

"Ah! do you speak for your father, or yourself, for, if I recall aright Miss Lucille is his ward, and she was on his estate?"

"I speak for myself, sir, and I shall expect to be heeded," was the hot reply, for the remark of the artist angered Nevil.

"My dear sir, I am not one to heed the advice of a boy, and I advise you to state your grievance to your father and let him come to me, if he deems that I have done wrong in meeting his ward in the woods and giving her a few sketching lessons."

"You have done wrong, and your gray head should have taught you sense, you old fool; but as it has not, if you repeat your offense you will have to answer for it, old as you are."

The speaker was Harry Edwards.

But he had not calculated the outcome that might follow his insult to an old man.

He had expected his words to fairly frighten the artist.

Instead, with a bound that belied his age, Gerald Hull sprung forward, grasped the young man in a grip of iron, and dragged him from his horse, when, very much as he would box the ears of a boy, he dealt with Harry Edwards and throw him half-stunned upon the ground.

"Mr. Dean, I beg that you will not insult me too, and force me to serve you in like manner," came the calmly spoken words, addressed to Nevil Dean.

The latter was astonished.

He knew that Harry Edwards had prided himself most justly upon his great strength, and yet this old man handled him as he would a child.

He saw that the artist was not a man to trifle with.

He had not had time to dismount and go to the rescue of his friend before the affair was over, and Harry Edwards lay half-stunned upon the grass.

Rising, with livid face, bleeding nose and the imprint of the hand of the artist upon him, Harry Edwards was beside himself with rage, and drew from his breast a dirk knife and rushed upon the old man.

Nevil Dean uttered a cry of warning to restrain him, and threw himself from his horse.

But ere he could do aught to prevent the attack, Harry Edwards was upon the artist.

But the knife did not descend, for the wrist was grasped in a grasp of steel, the arm was bent backward and the agony endured caused the young intended assassin to drop his knife and howl with rage and pain.

"Now, begone, sir, from my grounds, or I will make short work of you," sternly said the artist, and only too glad to have the clutch upon him released, Harry Edwards stalked rapidly toward his horse and scrambled into the saddle.

"Get my knife, Dean!" he said.

But the artist put his foot upon the blade, and said with a smile:

"To the victor belong the spoils, Master Nevil."

"My regards at home, please," and he took up the knife and turning on his heel ascended the stairs leading up to the piazza.

Nevil Dean was nonplused and also hastily mounted, while Harry Edwards called out:

"You shall hear from me for this, old graybeard."

"As you please, my boy," was the answer as the artist half turned and a moment after entered the house.

"I shall challenge him, for then we will be on equal terms, but my Heaven, he has the strength of a giant, Nevil."

"So it seemed, for he handled you as though you were a child."

"Yes, and I will kill him for it, white-

haired though he be, for no man can surpass me as a shot, or swordsman.

"You must carry my challenge to him, Nevil."

"Yes, but I am sorry we went there."

"I am not, for I shall kill him," was the savage response of Harry Edwards, and he meant to be as good as his word.

CHAPTER XL.

THE GOVERNESS.

It took Harry Edwards some little time to recover from the affair with the old artist.

Nevil asked him to go by Valley View with him, but the young man had an idea that he did not look very prepossessing, for one eye was bruised, his brow was cut, his nose had bled freely and his face was swollen considerably, while his arm pained him from the wrenching given it by Gerald Hull.

"I'll go home and recuperate, and will have to say that my horse fell with me, for I don't look just right," he said to Nevil.

"When will I see you again?"

"I'll ride over when I get presentable; but come to the village when you can, and my advice is for you to speak to your father about that old reprobate, only don't tell him that I had trouble with him."

"No, I'll keep that dark, you may be certain," and the two parted.

Arriving at Valley View, Nevil found his father considerably exercised over the disappearance of Lawyer Roger Leflingwell.

Then, too, Lucille had told him about the horsemen seeing her sketching in the woods, and that Gerald Hull was with her, and he was angry at this.

"The old fellow is an adventurer, and would marry you if he could, Lucille, to get possession of your money," he had told her.

"If those who want to marry me for my money are adventurers, uncle, there are plenty of them about."

"But I am a mere child, and will not think of marriage for years yet."

"And remember, Nevil is the one who loves you most dearly, Lucille, and were you to refuse his love it would break his heart," said the planter, throwing in a good word for his son.

"Would it?" was the quiet response, and just then the young man with the loving heart entered the room.

"Ah, Lucille, I am glad you are here, for I wish to say before father, how pained I was to discover you alone with that old artist to-day."

"Were you?"

"Indeed I was."

"And why?"

"Well, I don't think it was right."

"Don't you?"

"No, I do not, nor does father."

"No, I was just saying as much to Lucille when you came, my son."

"You know of it, then?"

"Yes, for she told me, and says that Mr. Hull has been giving her lessons often before."

"It is shameful."

"Be careful, Nevil Dean, how you tell me that I would be guilty of any act that is shameful," and the eyes of the maiden flashed.

"Pardon me, Lou; but I feel warm about it, as so many saw you."

"And, doing no wrong, what care I who sees my actions?"

"But you must not do so again, Lucille."

"You are not my guardian, Cousin Nevil, so spare your lecturing for others; but, Uncle Dean, as I am anxious to learn to sketch well, and dear old Mr. Hull is of such benefit to me, I will ask you to write to that lady in Baltimore who wrote you, asking to become my governess, and say that I will accept her services."

"But, Lucille, she will not be able to teach you anything that your Aunt Ruth and I cannot."

"Oh, yes; for she is a fine musician, her letter stated, and more, she can chaperon me, for I shall continue my sketching under Mr. Hull as before."

"I do not think we can arrange to have a stranger in the house, Lucille."

"No, father, it will be a dreadful bore, and I would not permit it," said Nevil.

"What do you think, wife?" asked Mr. Dean, as Mrs. Dean just then entered the room, and he explained the situation to her.

"I do not wish a governess here, Leslie, if you are against it."

"Very well, I shall start at once to boarding-school, and, as I may be in your way, too, uncle, I'll spend my vacation with some of my school friends, so that I need not worry you all any more with my presence."

This cool decision fell like a bombshell in a camp.

It fairly seemed to startle Mr. Dean, while Mrs. Dean cried:

"No, not write for the governess, Leslie."

"Yes, a hundred governesses, rather than lose Lucille, whom we all love so dearly."

"By the way, I wish to run up to Baltimore for a day, so will bring her back with me," said Nevil.

And so Lucille again won the day, and Nevil brought the lady back with him.

She was a woman with a sadly beautiful face, snow-white hair, and was dressed in deep mourning.

She seemed older, on account of her white hair, and yet she was scarcely forty-five and very handsome, with her olive-tinted skin, large black eyes and fine form.

Mrs. Herman had listened to Nevil's wishes, as to what kind of a governess he wished her to be over Lucille, as the two came down from the city together, but had made few comments.

Upon her arrival if Mr. Dean and his wife had intended to treat her as an inferior personage, they quickly changed their minds, for Mrs. Herman was not one to be snubbed.

Lucille seemed to like her from the very moment she saw her, for going up to her she kissed her and said:

"We shall be good friends I know."

"Let me show you to your room which adjoins mine."

"Do you ride horseback?" Lucille had asked, when the two were alone together in the pretty room to which she had conducted the governess.

"Oh yes, and I am very fond of it, Lucille."

"How glad I am."

"And you play and sing too?"

"Yes, though my voice is not what it once was, for you see I am getting old," she said with a sad smile.

"White hairs are no sign of age, and you certainly look young, and are very beautiful."

"I shall love you, I know."

Mrs. Herman seemed drawn at once toward the beautiful girl, in her frankness and innocence, and from that day the two became inseparable friends, a strange friendship between two of such different ages.

Mrs. Herman sung after supper that evening, and her voice fairly thrilled her hearers, while her playing was also exquisitely beautiful.

She confessed to sketching also, and Lucille boldly said:

"Now we can meet dear old Mr. Hull, the artist, and have the benefit of his instruction, for busybodies can say nothing now, Mrs. Herman, with you as my protector—eh, Nevil?" and Lucille cast a wicked glance at Nevil, who felt the cut at him keenly, in being called a busybody.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE EAVESDROPPER.

It took some days for Harry Edwards to recuperate from the punishment given him by the old artist; but the time spent indoors, as he cared not to give explanations of his injuries, were spent in nursing his anger as well as his bruised face and arm.

At last he felt that he was able to meet the artist in an affair of honor, be it with sword or pistol, and so he rode over to Valley View to consult his chum upon the matter.

He found Nevil away from home, but expected back very soon, and, as Mr. and Mrs. Dean were also absent on a visit, it fell upon Lucille to entertain him.

He found that sweet young lady sitting on the piazza with her governess, Mrs. Herman, and to the ladies he was presented.

Lucille had admired the handsome young man, as far as his looks went, but somewhat

feared him on account of his record, for she had heard of his being a duelist who prided himself upon his power to kill an adversary.

She therefore received him with a certain restraint, told him that Nevil would soon return, and set to work to entertain him as best she could, though willing that she had not been seen by him, so that she could have excused herself.

Mrs. Herman was engaged in some fancy needlework, but Lucille saw that her eyes were very often upon the visitor.

He had a pleasant manner, and his voice was particularly winning; but somehow Lucille could not feel at home with him.

Though a girl, as has been said, she was much of a woman, in fact would readily be mistaken for one in her eighteenth year.

Her manners were reserved, but pleasant, and she had a frank way about her that was very attractive.

The conversation turned upon the affairs of the neighborhood the past two years, from the death of Planter Granger, and the return and flight of his son, to the happenings of the past week, when Lawyer Leflingwell had so strangely disappeared, and Harry Edwards took occasion to say that he had not believed in the guilt of Lieutenant Granger and was glad that he had escaped.

Had he said this for effect he could not have made himself more popular with Lucille, who at once thanked him while she said:

"I am so glad that you deem Cousin Merton innocent, for so many think him guilty."

Harry Edwards looked pleased at this, and glancing over at the silent governess found her eyes fixed upon him.

He almost started under their gaze, and tried to break the spell they seemed to hold upon him.

But try as he might to laugh and talk with Lucille, he felt uneasy, for each time that he glanced toward Mrs. Herman he would meet her gaze, and it was a gaze that he did not like.

At last he saw Nevil riding up the avenue and was glad to have him come and break the spell, for spell it was that he seemed to be held under by the governess.

Arising, he hastily descended from the piazza, and advanced to the hitching rack to meet Nevil.

"Ah, Harry, glad to see you, and you look as good as new once more," said Nevil.

"Yes, Richard is himself again, Nevil; but who on earth is yonder star-eyed woman on the piazza?"

"Mrs. Herman, Lucille's governess."

"Did she not introduce you?"

"Yes, simply as Mrs. Herman, and I guessed she was some visitor from the city; but I remember now that you told me you had brought down with you a lady chaperon for Miss Lucille."

"Yes, a girl that will enable Lucille to meet the old artist as often as she wishes."

"I'll see that it does not occur, for I shall lay the old vagabond up to-morrow, if I do not finish him, for I came over to ask you to go and challenge him for me."

"Certainly; I cannot refuse if you wish it."

"Of course I do; but tell me, Nevil, does that strange-eyed woman affect you unpleasantly?"

"Harry, it is just what she does."

"She seems to read me, so that I have quit thinking when her eyes are upon me."

"She so seems to read me."

"Why, I was as nervous as a thoroughbred colt under her eyes."

"But let us talk business."

"Come to my room then."

The two young men went to Nevil's room and there began to arrange a plan of action for a meeting with Gerald Hull, the old artist.

Having come to a decision in the matter, they left the mansion, mounted their horses and rode off together, Mrs. Herman quietly remarking:

"They are bent upon some mischief, Lucille."

"You think so, Mrs. Herman?"

"I know it, for I read as much in young Edwards's coming here."

"Have you known him long?"

"Since coming to Mistletoe Manor to live."

"Who is he?"

"The son of a rich merchant in the village."

"He is bookkeeper for his father, I believe, and is greatly admired."

"He has a handsome face."

"Still I do not think it a true face, Mrs. Herman."

"You read character well, Lucille, for one of your years, for his face is not a true one."

"He seems to me to be a man with a history, young as he is."

"He is, for he was dismissed from the navy, in which he was a midshipman, for killing a brother officer in a duel, and since his return he has been engaged in an affair in which his adversary very nearly lost his life."

"Still I feel kindly toward him for what he said of Cousin Merton Granger."

"But you think that he and Nevil are bent on mischief now?"

"I am sure of it."

"I wonder what it can be; but the two are great chums, and uncle has feared Mr. Edwards would lead Nevil into a life of evil."

"Pardon me, but I believe one is no better than the other, and I am very happy to see that neither of them hold influence over you, Lucille," and Mrs. Herman spoke with an earnestness which Lucille had never before seen her exhibit.

In the mean time the two young men had ridden down the road leading to The Hermitage.

Arriving near the old home, Nevil Dean had gone in alone, while Harry Edwards had dismounted and thrown himself down upon the grass to await his return.

As he lay there, while his horse fed in a little vale not far distant, he heard voices, and two men came along the path and halted near him.

A man of honor would have made his presence known, for he was concealed from their view by a thicket, while he could hear their every utterance.

One of the men was Gerald Hull, the artist, and the other was one of the officers of the mysterious schooner, which must have just come into the cove, for the spot was not a couple of hundred yards from it.

What the young eavesdropper heard caused him to start and turn pale, and rising, he was trying to creep cautiously away, when the keen eye of the artist caught sight of him, and in an instant came the words, sternly uttered:

"Halt, or you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER XLII.

SEALED LIPS.

At the ringing words addressed to him, Harry Edwards came very quickly to a halt.

It was the artist who had uttered the words, and now the young man tried to put a bold face upon the matter, so wheeled quickly and said:

"Mr. Hull, I can see no reason for addressing such words to me, sir, for I am now waiting here for my friend, who has gone to issue you a challenge from me."

"I can see a reason, sir, for by your eavesdropping you overheard the conversation of this gentleman and myself, and I do not wish it so to be," returned the artist.

"I was lying asleep on the grass yonder, and your voices awoke me; but I did not hear what you said, and not to appear an eavesdropper, as I felt that you did not see me, I was stealing away when you so insultingly halted me, for being armed, you had the power to so do."

"Upon your honor you did not hear?" and the eyes of Gerald Hull seemed to read the very soul of the man he questioned.

Harry Edwards's face flushed and then paled, while he grew nervous.

But he answered, though avoiding the eye of the artist as he did so:

"Upon my honor I did not hear your words."

"I do not believe you, sir; in fact I know that you utter a falsehood."

"Ha! You dare so speak to me?"

"Spare your heroics, sir, for here comes your friend, and I suppose we can arrange matters here, as you seem so anxious to meet me."

"We certainly can, and you shall eat your words to me," was the firm reply.

The artist smiled, and turning to the young sailor who was his companion, said:

"May I ask you to serve me in this affair, sir?"

"Certainly, sir; I am at your service."

"Who is your friend, sir?" asked Harry Edwards, with a sneer.

"A gentleman, sir, and I am sorry I cannot say as much of you—oh! Mr. Dean, sorry I was not at home, for I have just learned that you have been to call upon me," and the artist turned to Nevil Dean, who just then rode up and dismounted, seeming greatly surprised at seeing the artist there, and glancing curiously at the officer from the mysterious schooner.

"As Mr. Edwards has told me the nature of your business with me, Mr. Dean, permit me to say that I accept his challenge, and this gentleman, whom I met half an hour ago here in the woods, has kindly consented to act for me, and I may as well remark that any weapons will suit me, but the time must be *now*, the spot *right here*."

"I prefer to wait until to-morrow, sir," said Harry Edwards.

"Sorry, sir, but, as the challenged party, I have the right to say when, where, and weapons to be used."

"May I ask you, sir, as your vessel, you said, was in the cove, to secure such weapons from her as these gentlemen may decide upon?" and the artist turned to the sailor, who at once placed a whistle to his lips and gave three sharp blasts.

"I prefer to have another day set, sir; while as for place and weapons you can select to suit yourself," said Harry Edwards.

"Mr. Edwards, I will hear to no other time than *now*, no other place than *here*."

"If you are not an arrant coward, you will meet me, as you have so wished to do."

"If you refuse, then I shall punish you as an eavesdropper in a way that you will not like."

There was no mistaking the fact that the old artist was in deadly earnest, and livid with rage, Harry Edwards said, hotly:

"I will meet you now, and here, and with what weapons you wish."

"Come, Nevil, a word with you apart."

"No!"

The word broke in a command from the artist, and both the young men looked at him in surprise.

"No, I say, not a word shall pass between you, for you are as treacherous as a snake, Edwards."

"Don't force me to kill you, which I will do if you drive me to it, and thus prevent the pleasure you would experience in taking my life."

Nevil Dean was amazed. He did not know about the eavesdropping scene; but he saw that the old artist was desperately in earnest.

Just then a sailor came rapidly along the road leading to the cove.

He saluted the officer politely and halted, while the latter said:

"Return and bring a pair of dueling pistols and swords that are in the cabin."

"Do not delay."

The sailor saluted and started off at a run.

"Do you mean, Mr. Hull, that my friend Edwards must meet you against his will?" asked Nevil.

"Yes, so if he has any preparations to make against death let him make them."

"Here are pencils and paper should he need them, and you and this gentleman can witness any papers he may draw up."

"I have no fear of death, sir; but certain it is that you shall receive no mercy at my hands," said Harry Edwards, whose skill as a swordsman and unerring aim as a shot caused him to feel no anxiety whatever as to the result, especially where he met a man of the artist's years.

In vain was it that Harry Edwards tried to get a word with Nevil, for the artist would not permit it, as he suspected that he meant to make known what he had overheard between himself and the schooner's officer.

"It will keep," muttered Edwards grimly, as he felt that, after killing the artist, as he meant to do, he would have the sailor at his mercy, and with the aid of Nevil would make a prisoner of him.

The fact was Harry Edwards already

saw himself a hero, when he would accomplish what he felt it was in his power to do.

The sailor did not remain long away, and returned at a run, bearing with him a pair of swords and a rosewood box containing dueling pistols.

"Your choice, sir," said the sailor, turning to the artist, when he had told the sailor to put the weapons down and return to the schooner.

"I will select swords, sir," replied the artist quietly.

The face of Harry Edwards showed his pleasure at this, for he felt that he could run the artist through, while with pistols he stood a chance of getting wounded, perhaps killed.

"As Mr. Edwards was once in the navy, he should know how to handle a blade well," added the artist.

Harry Edwards slightly started, for he did not know how the artist had—a stranger in the neighborhood—become acquainted with his early life.

The blades were at once taken from their case, and proved to be superb weapons, as well as perfect matches in length and hilt.

But Nevil was given his choice, and a moment after the two men faced each other.

A strange sight it was, for one man was white-haired, and appeared about to step across the threshold of the grave, while the other, young and handsome, was just over the threshold of manhood.

Harry Edwards had thrown aside his coat, but the artist retained his.

In the face of the young man was fierce hatred and perfect confidence commingled, while in the face of the artist was stern resolve.

At the word, given by Nevil Dean, the blades crossed and the combat began.

Almost instantly did Harry Edwards turn pale, and his look of perfect confidence faded away, for he felt that he had met his master with the blade, splendid swordsman though he was.

As though not wishing to torture his young adversary, the artist quickly acted on the offensive, and the moment after drove his blade deep into the side of Harry Edwards, who, with a moan of anguish on his lips, sunk back into the arms of Nevil Dean, who cried excitedly:

"My God! he is dead!"

"Yes, I have sealed his lips forever," was the calm reply of the artist.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A PROPHECY FULFILLED.

NEVIL DEAN was almost broken down by the sad blow upon him, of the death of his dearest friend.

It had been so unexpected.

He had such confidence in the power of Harry Edwards to play with the old artist that he had not looked to the tables being turned.

He had not wished for a duel between the two, for if Edwards wounded or killed the artist, he was fearful that it would cause a great scandal.

In justice to the old artist he was compelled to admit that the fault all through lay with his friend.

He knew that the sympathy would be with Gerald Hull, as an inoffensive old man, being attacked by a young duelist.

He knew also that Harry Edwards was a very unpopular man in the community.

Like a man stunned by a blow, Nevil Dean knelt upon the ground, holding in his arms the dead form of his friend.

"The sword pierced his heart," he said, speaking mechanically.

"Oh, yes, it went clean through it, as I intended, for he meant to murder me, had he found I did not know how to handle a blade; but had you not better ride to Valley View and get a carriage to take your friend home in?" and the artist spoke without the slightest show of emotion.

"Yes, I will do so; but I hate to leave the body here."

"I will remain, sir, for I suppose this officer has his duties to attend to."

"Yes, I must return on board," replied the young sailor, who, like the artist, was perfectly calm.

"I will go then at once."

"Would it not be as well to have your father go ahead to the village and acquaint Mr. Edwards with his son's death, for I believe the young man was his idol, and the shock of seeing him brought home dead and knowing nothing of what had occurred, might be too severe on him?" said the artist, with thoughtful regard for the father of the man whom he had slain.

"I will ask father to go," said Nevil, glad to get out of having to do so unpleasant a duty himself, and mounting his horse he rode rapidly away toward Valley View.

Mr. Dean and his wife had returned from their drive, and were seated upon the piazza with Mrs. Herman and Lucille, and all saw by the rapid manner of Nevil's approach to the house that something had gone wrong.

"What is it, my son?" cried Mr. Dean, as the young man dashed up and threw himself from his horse.

"Father, poor Harry has been killed."

"Edwards?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thrown from his horse?"

"No, sir."

"But how?"

"In a duel."

A cry of amazement from every lip.

"With whom?"

"The artist."

"Hull?"

"Yes, sir."

Again a cry of amazement from the ladies and Leslie Dean.

"Come, Nevil, tell me what has occurred," said Mr. Dean, excitedly.

"Well, sir, Harry insisted upon my taking a challenge to Mr. Hull, and I went to the Pirates' Nest to do so."

"But why send that man a challenge?"

"The other day, sir, when we saw him with Lucille, Harry said I should make him understand that he should not meet her alone as he had, and—"

And I wish you to understand, Nevil, that neither Mr. Edwards or yourself had a right to interfere in what I was pleased to do," warmly said Lucille.

"Well, we thought he was compromising you, and rode up to see him, when some words followed between Harry and the artist, and the result was that my poor friend attacked him with a knife, and got pretty badly punished by Mr. Hull, who is a perfect giant in strength."

"When was this, my son?" asked Mr. Dean.

"Two weeks ago, sir."

"And you told me nothing of it?"

"No, sir, for Harry did not wish; but he came here to-day and asked me to carry a challenge for him."

"I did so; but while I was gone to the Hermitage, Harry met Hull, and an officer from that mysterious schooner, which is again in the cove, and upon my return all was arranged, and they fought with swords, which the sailor sent on board his vessel after."

"And he killed Harry Edwards?"

"Yes, sir, ran him through the heart, for good as poor Harry was as a swordsman, that man is better."

"He is a perfect marvel, sir."

"And the body?"

"Mr. Hull is watching by it until I return with the carriage, and, father, I wish to ask you to go on to the village and tell Mr. Edwards just what has happened, and that I am coming with his son's body."

"I don't like this at all, my son; but it is my duty to do so, unless you will go to see Mr. Edwards, while I bring the body."

"I would not go for the world, sir; but be sure and let him know just what has occurred before I come," and Nevil shuddered at the thought of meeting the grief-stricken father.

But Mr. Dean acted promptly, and ordering his chaise drove on to the village, while Nevil went in the carriage after the body of his friend.

As for the three ladies, they seemed to be deeply moved, for Mrs. Dean went to her room to weep, as was her wont when excited, and Mrs. Herman paced to and fro on the piazza, her face showing that she felt keenly what had happened, while Lucille leaned back in her easy-chair, her face covered with her hands, as though to shut out

of her memory the handsome face which had looked into her own only a short two hours before.

"You said they were bent upon mischief, Mrs. Herman," she murmured.

"Yes, and the sword fell when least expected," was the almost stern response of the governess.

CHAPTER XLIV.

BLACK GHOSTS.

MR. LESLIE DEAN drove on toward the village in no good humor at the duty he had to perform in breaking to the father the sad news of his only son's death.

"I don't like it, Mark—I don't like it," he said again and again to the negro who accompanied him.

But there was no alternative, and he drove up to the store of Merchant Edwards, and there met Lawyer Greene, to whom he made known his sad tidings.

Then the two went into the private office of the merchant, and sent for him to come there.

He obeyed the summons, and greeted the two pleasantly, for they were good customers of his.

But he saw that they had something to communicate, and ever-dreading evil to his wild, wayward son, he cried, eagerly:

"You have something to tell me?"

"It is of my poor boy?"

"Alas, yes, Mr. Edwards," and Mr. Dean told the sad news.

The father sunk into a chair and buried his face in his hands, while he moaned forth:

"I feared it! I dreaded it all these years."

"Come with me, my friends, to my house, that I may meet his body there."

They followed him, and the clerks were told to close the store and drape it with black, while the news of Harry Edwards's death went from lip to lip, and people wondered how it was that Harry Edwards, so skillful as a swordsman and dreaded as a duelist, had fallen under the hand of an aged man, who, as an artist, was not expected to be skilled in the use of weapons.

At last the Valley View carriage arrived, bearing Nevil Dean and his ghastly comrade, and the body was borne into the house of the merchant, who once more wished to hear the story of his son's death, and from the lips of the one who had witnessed it.

Strange to say, Nevil Dean placed no blame upon the old artist, and the father, though feeling bitterly against the slayer of his son, did not utter revengeful threats, as many had feared.

As a storm was threatening, Leslie Dean told Mark to drive the chaise back, while he returned in the carriage with his son at a later hour.

It was quite late when they left the merchant's house, and Nicholas Greene, the lawyer who had been so bitter toward Merton Granger, was set down at his house in the village, as the carriage drove by, for it was pouring rain.

As the carriage neared Valley View, driving swiftly along through the drenching storm which had set in, the driver suddenly drew up almost to a walk.

"What is it, Thomas?" called out Mr. Dean.

"Only some gemmans on horseback, sah," said Thomas, and like black phantoms half a dozen horsemen passed by the carriage, and once more it drove rapidly on.

"Who were they, Nevil?"

"I don't know, father; but doubtless some hunters returning home," was the reply of the young man.

When the vehicle drew up at Valley View Thomas asked eagerly:

"Did you see 'em, massa?"

"Who?"

"Dem horsemen, sah."

"Yes; who were they?"

"Don't know, sah; but dey looked for all de world like black ghosts."

"Bah! they were some hunters returning home."

"No, sah, dey wasn't no hunters, for dey didn't have no guns, or dogs, and dey was all in long black cloaks, wid hoods drawn over dere heads, sah, instead o' hats, and dere horses was black as night, too."

"They were an odd-looking set as I saw them, Thomas."

"Deed dey was, sah, and dere was seben ob 'em, wid one hoss dat didn't hab no rider."

"One led horse?"

"Yes, sah, and dey just held de road, so I had to pull out for 'em."

"I tells yer, massa, dem was black ghosts, and we is gwine to hear ob dem ag'in, sah, I feels sart'in," and Thomas drove off to the stable with fear and trembling at what he had seen.

And Thomas was right, for the "black ghosts" were heard of again, and in a most startling manner, as the disappearance of Lawyer Nicholas Greene the next morning, was traced to their agency, when Leslie Dean and Nevil told what they had seen.

Like his partner, Lawyer Greene lived alone, for he was a widower and childless.

He had a comfortable little cottage in the village, and his office was also there, for a large sign hung out in front bearing the legend:

"LEFFINGWELL & GREENE.

"Attorneys-at-Law."

Since the disappearance of his colleague, Nicholas Greene, Esquire, had not grieved so much as people supposed he would.

But a solution to this was found in the fact that he was now the shining legal light of the county, and would occupy a front seat in future, when in the past he had been compelled to sit in the shadow of his partner.

He dwelt in his cottage with only a man servant to look to his comfort, for he took his meals at the Restful Inn.

In the morning the servant had called him, to find the bed had been occupied, but his master was gone.

There were muddy tracks upon the floor and the evidence that the lawyer had hastily dressed, for his stock and collar had not been put on, and he was known to be very careful about his toilet.

The front door had been found open by the negro and upon it was stuck a card which bore the word and numeral:

"NUMBER 4."

The negro was frightened, for he had in his mind the disappearance of Judge Ramsey and Lawer Leffingwell.

So he hastened to give the alarm.

The storm had cleared away, and soon a large party had turned out to find the missing lawyer, for a visit to the home of Merchant Edwards, and every other house in town, failed to discover him.

The rain had washed all tracks away; but when Mr. Leslie Dean and Nevil drove into town, and they heard the news, and told their story, and how they had dropped Lawyer Greene at his door, on their way home, and then met on the road a party of horsemen enveloped in cloaks, and with a led horse, there was no doubt in the minds of all but that they had kidnapped the attorney.

But, who were they, and from whence had they come?

That was the question that no one could answer, along with the query as to what the "Number 4" meant that was stuck upon the door of the lawyer's cottage.

Judge Ramsey, Lawyer Leffingwell and Nicholas Greene accounted for three; but who was Number Four?

CHAPTER XLV.

A TELL-TALE LOCKET.

VAILED in deepest mystery were the strange disappearances of Judge Ramsey and the two lawyers.

Not a soul could account for it, other than that some secret band of kidnappers were at work.

Again the mysterious schooner came under suspicion, but the fact that horsemen had been seen showed that the sailors could not be guilty, unless some one was in league with them to furnish the horses.

And so the affair remained a mystery.

Harry Edwards was taken to his grave, and his desolate father resumed his daily routine of work once more, and it was rumor that he had to suffer another cruel blow, as in looking over his accounts, so long in his son's keeping it was found that the fast youth had squandered a large amount

of money which sorely cramped the merchant.

Many persons felt an interest to see the artist, but he did not encourage their curiosity, and when an officious officer of the law called to ask what he knew of the strange schooner, as a sailor from on board had been his second in his duel with young Edwards, he was told to find out from those on the vessel.

Several days after the fatal duel, Lucille and Mrs. Herman mounted their horses for a ride.

They had debated as to going to the glen, where Lucille could finish her sketching, as, after what had occurred the maiden seemed to almost dread meeting the artist.

"He will doubtless keep at home, so let us go, dear, as I wish you to finish that beautiful sketch," said Mrs. Herman.

So to the glen they went, and Lucille fished her easel out of the bushes where she kept it hidden, and taking her large portfolio from the horn of her saddle, took her seat and began work, sketching a bit of scenery that opened before her.

Mrs. Herman had before met the artist, on other visits with Lucille to the glen; but neither seemed to expect to see him that day, and they were somewhat startled when a voice behind them said:

"Good-morning, ladies."

It was Gerald Hull, the artist, calm, serene as a May morn.

Advancing he bowed low, as they greeted him, and, without reference to what had occurred near that spot a few days before, began to look over Lucille Gazzam's work.

"You are steadily improving, Miss Lucille, and when you transfer this sketch to canvas in colors, you will find it makes a very beautiful painting," he said.

"You are very kind to say so, Mr. Hull; but I will owe it to you, for you certainly have been my teacher," returned Lucille.

"I missed you the other day, for I was here, as usual," he said.

It was the day of Harry Edwards's funeral, and Lucille had attended it, at the earnest request of Nevil.

"I went to the village that day," she said evasively.

"Ah, yes, to attend young Edwards's funeral, for I remember my valet was in town and saw you."

"It was an unfortunate affair, Miss Lucille, and I deeply regretted to take his life, but it was necessary that I should do so."

"Do you know, Mrs. Herman, that your face haunts me, as though I had seen it before; I mean of course, before our present acquaintance."

The woman fairly started at his words, and for a moment did not speak.

Then she said:

"A resemblance to some old friend, doubtless, Mr. Hull."

"No, it is not a resemblance, but a reality."

"We have somewhere met before, Mrs. Herman, in the far past!"

"Can you not help me to recall when and where?"

"No, sir," and she spoke almost coldly, and turned away, as though to end the conversation.

A few days after, when another time came for Lucille to resume her sketching, she felt too unwell to go, and asked Mrs. Herman to ride to the glen and so tell Mr. Hull, for he had promised to be there, and bring her some sketches which he had made.

The governess made no objection, but mounting her horse, an animal which Mr. Dean had placed at her disposal, she rode to the glen.

She was a fine horsewoman, looking well when mounted, with her willowy, graceful form, and she dashed swiftly along until she reached the rendezvous.

Just as she was about to draw rein a deer sprung across the road, frightening her horse by his sudden rush, and the animal, wheeling suddenly, unseated his rider, and she fell heavily to the ground, where she lay stunned by the shock.

Just at that moment the artist came in sight.

His coming had frightened the deer, and seeing the governess fall, he ran hastily toward her.

Raising her to a half-sitting posture, he

fanned her with his broad sombrero, and then ran to the brook near by, and filled it with water.

Dashing the water into her face, he saw no sign of returning consciousness, and so unfastened the neck of her riding-habit, when suddenly his eyes fell upon a chain of strange pattern about her neck, and to it was attached a locket of most unique manufacture.

With a cry of amazement he grasped it in his hand, touched a spring and two miniatures were revealed.

"Great God! can it be?"

"No! no! no! and yet this resemblance, which is so striking—this memory of a face which so haunts me?"

"Yes, it must be, and—ah! she revives, and she must not know."

He quickly replaced the locket, and fastened the neck of the habit again, while he fanned her with his hat.

Soon the eyes opened and met his.

She gave a half-cry, whether of alarm or pain he did not know, and he said quickly:

"Your horse threw you, Mrs. Herman, and you had a severe fall that stunned you."

"Are you injured, think you?"

"No, Mr. Hull, but my head struck the ground with a force that stunned me."

"You have been so kind to me, and I thank you."

"I am better now, and able to walk, for I suppose my horse has run home."

"Yes, I could not catch him; but I will go up to The Hermitage and get my old chaise."

"No, I can walk, sir; but I fear my horse returning will alarm Lucille, who is not well to-day, and so asked me to come and tell you she was unable to meet you."

"Poor child; nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no, only a cold."

"Let me offer my arm, for you need my aid."

She took his arm in silence, and they walked on together, until suddenly they saw the Valley View carriage coming, and in it was Lucille, who had been alarmed by the coming back, riderless, of the horse ridden by the governess.

Explanations were soon made, and while the carriage drove back to Valley View, the artist retraced his way slowly homeward, his head bent, as though in deepest thought, while ever and anon there would break from his lips the words:

"Great God! should it be she!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

ONCE MORE THE KIDNAPPERS.

WEEKS went by after the death of Harry Edwards and the disappearance of Lawyer Greene, and, as no new cause for excitement arose in the community, the people began to hope that the troubles of the neighborhood had at last come to an end.

Merton Granger was spoken of often, by both his friends and foes, but seldom was his name brought up in the Valley View household.

He was considered as dead there, and Leslie Dean had several times told Lucille that she was really the owner of his large estate and should move into Mistletoe Manor.

But Lucille was firm in her intention not to do so.

She rode over to the plantation once each week, and Mrs. Herman always accompanied her, and Hickory always gave them a warm welcome.

"No news from master, missy?" was his stereotyped question at all times.

"Nothing, Hickory."

"Folks say he is dead, missy; but I don't believe it."

"No, Hickory, he is not dead, for he has drawn from his Baltimore lawyers the money he asked Mr. Clemmons to place with them for him."

"He will turn up some day, I hope," Lucille was wont to say.

The plantation was kept in perfect condition, under the eye of Hickory, and the mansion was always ready for the coming of its master, for the faithful old negro had it cared for just the same as though Merton Granger was dwelling in it.

Since his duel with Harry Edwards, the old artist had seemed to keep more closely to his home.

Attempts to find out from him aught re-

garding the mysterious schooner was useless, and yet Lucille was assured in her own mind that he knew all about the strange craft.

For some weeks the schooner had not been seen on the coast, and the people were wondering if she would appear again, when one morning the community were awakened to the fact that she was in The Hermitage Cove, and had run in there evidently during a severe storm of the night before.

But this was not all, for again were the people startled by the discovery that there had been two more mysterious disappearances of citizens upon the night before.

They were not prominent citizens; but they had disappeared at night from their homes in the same remarkable manner that the others had gone, and the closest search failed to discover any trace of them.

Two weeks more and two more citizens disappeared in the same miraculous manner.

Then the community became most thoroughly alarmed and aroused, and an indignation meeting was held at which there were many persons in attendance from far and near.

At this meeting the facts came out that these men had all been kidnapped upon stormy nights, that mounted men had been seen riding through the darkness, and more, that the mysterious schooner had always been seen in the cove near the Hermitage.

These facts must certainly connect the craft with the mysterious disappearances, and the people agreed that a night patrol should be kept to watch the vessel when in the cove, and to also keep an eye upon the "Black Ghosts," as some called them, but in other words, the kidnappers.

The guards were selected for patrol work, and the meeting broke up, after having decided that a prominent citizen should be sent to Washington to ask for a United States cruiser to come on the coast and overhaul the mysterious schooner.

That very night a storm came up, and in the morning it was found that three more citizens were missing, and more, the schooner was discovered lying quietly at anchor in The Hermitage Cove.

The people became almost beside themselves, and men went around by day and night, to guard against the kidnappers, while patrols guarded the coast and highways.

In good time the cruiser arrived, and the public felt relieved, for they were sure that the schooner was a kidnapping craft, and their troubles would now end.

But again, under the shelter of a terrible storm that swept over the bay and shore, other citizens disappeared, and upon the door of one was a ticket which read:

"Number 15."

The mysterious schooner was not seen in the cove the next morning, but had been sighted flying down the bay with the cruiser in full chase.

Several days passed and the cruiser had not returned, nor was the "Kidnapper of the Chesapeake," as the people called the schooner, seen on the coast, and many hoped she had been captured.

"Uncle Dean, do you not notice one thing about these mysterious disappearances?" asked Lucille one evening, after Number 15 had disappeared from the community in the same remarkable manner as had Judge Ramsey.

"What is it, Lucille?" Leslie Dean inquired in an almost cross tone, for he had become somewhat nervous about these remarkable happenings.

It was at the breakfast table one morning, and all eyes were turned upon the young girl for an explanation of her question.

"Well, sir, Judge Ramsey is the one who sat in judgment upon Cousin Merton and who so unjustly charged the jury, while Lawyer Leffingwell and Mr. Greene were the prosecuting attorneys who seemed so determined to hang him."

"Then, every other person who has been kidnapped was one of the jury who found Cousin Merton guilty."

"I tell you, Cousin Dean, it looks to me as though Providence was bringing judgment upon them."

Leslie Dean sprung to his feet, uttering

something strangely like an oath, while Nevil cried:

"It is so! Strange that no one ever noticed that before," and he followed his father from the room, while Lucille, who had suggested the very remarkable fact, smiled significantly and suggested to Mrs. Herman that they should go for a ride, a suggestion that the governess very promptly acquiesced in.

The day, however, came on stormy, and their ride had to be postponed until the afternoon; but as the storm still continued it was given up and the family retired early to bed, excepting Mr. Dean and Nevil, who had been called to the village just at dark by a special messenger, who said that an important discovery had been made.

As they had not returned in the morning, Mrs. Dean grew alarmed, when Thomas told her that there were two large numbers stuck upon the front door.

These were:

"Number 16."

"Number 17."

These numbers accounted for the non-return of Mr. Dean and Nevil.

They too had disappeared in the same mysterious manner.

The kidnappers had at last struck the home of Valley View.

CHAPTER XLVII.

BROUGHT TO JUDGMENT.

THROUGH a severe gale, and over a dark sea, a vessel was driving rapidly.

Before her loomed up the shore, but at her helm was one who seemed to know just what he was about, for he held on his way steadily.

Higher and higher loomed up the dark mass ahead, which denoted land; but straight on went the vessel until it disappeared within the very shadows and glided into a little harborage.

Here the anchor was let fall, and a boat put off for the shore.

A man sprung out, and he was instantly met by a tall form, enveloped in a heavy cloak.

"All are ready, Vance, for the two last have just been brought in," said the man on shore.

"Ay ay, sir: will you board now?"

"Yes, so have the boats sent ashore for my party."

"Yes, sir," and the man returned to the boat, which at once put off for the schooner again.

In a short while it once more landed, and a larger boat accompanied it.

As it did so a number of men came marching slowly toward the beach, and, as they walked the sound of clanking chains was heard.

There were some thirty men in all, and about half of them seemed to be guards for the other half.

A flash of lightning revealed that a number of the men were heavily ironed and were also blindfolded, while all wore heavy cloaks that reached to their knees.

Into the boat they took their places, and the oarsmen pulled for the schooner.

Into the cabin of the vessel the guards led their prisoners, for they so appeared to be, and under the glare of the lamp they were distinctly visible.

The prisoners were placed in one end of the cabin, and the guards took positions upon either side, while at a table sat a man enveloped in a heavy cloak.

But his white hair and beard revealed that he was some other than Gerald Hull, the artist.

The guards were in mask, and having drawn a cowl over his own head, the artist said, in a stern voice:

"Remove the bandages from the eyes of the prisoners!"

It was at once done, and a number of exclamations were heard as each man recognized a familiar face.

There were Judge Ramsey, Lawyers Leffingwell and Greene, and eleven of the jurymen who had sat in judgment upon Merton Granger.

There were two others also present whom the reader will recognize, and these two were Leslie Dean and his son Nevil.

The faces of all were pallid, some more so than the others, and all looked anxiously at the one who confronted them, and also at their masked guards.

Presently the artist spoke, and his voice seemed deep and stern from beneath the cowl he wore.

He said:

"Judge Ramsey, Lawyers Leffingwell and Greene, and you gentlemen of the jury who tried and condemned to death Merton Granger, for the murder of Roderick Duval, I wish a few words with you.

"Malice, envy and hatred biased your judgment, and made you condemn Merton Granger as a murderer, wholly upon circumstantial evidence.

"He escaped the gallows through the bravery and noble-heartedness of a young girl, and he has been thus enabled to glean proof of his innocence, and also to bring before you the guilty ones.

"Condemning as you did a guiltless man, it is well for you that you have not his blood upon your souls; but you were guilty of acting from malice and wronging him, and for it you have been made to suffer imprisonment, some of you, it is true, but a short while.

"Once free of his fetters, Merton Granger set to work as a detective, and he has run to earth a great crime against him and his.

"He discovered that his father was murdered, for he died by slow poison, given by the hand of one whom he deemed as a brother to him, and whom he had befriended.

"He was poisoned, and yet dying left to his murderer a comfortable living.

"Merton Granger returned home, and a plot was arranged to get rid of him, and it was well-nigh successful.

"You remember how Mr. Duval died, and that he accused Merton Granger of having murdered him?

"Well, the man who shot him down strongly resembled Merton Granger, and tried to appear more like him.

"It was the son of the man who put Planter Granger to death by slow poison, and who, driven to the wall by his gambling debts, murdered poor old Roderick Duval to get the money he had with him.

"That money saved him from going to prison, and father and son were allies in crime, and their confederate in guilt was Harry Edwards, who fell by the hand of the old artist, Gerald Hull.

"Now, gentlemen, you will remember that one of the jury disappeared mysteriously, and as he was found to be a defaulter, it was supposed that he had fled to escape being sent to prison.

"That is a mistake, for he got drunk, went to sleep in Mistletoe Manor, awoke, and finding himself face to face with Merton Granger, fired upon him.

"The fire was returned, and Richard Dancy fell dead, and he was buried in the negro burying-ground on the plantation, and Merton Granger buried him there.

"Then the fugitive sailor fled to Baltimore, and at once began to act as a detective.

"He purchased a schooner which he had captured from Brandt the Buccaneer, and which you all know of, and coming to this coast, began his work.

"This is the vessel which you are now brought to judgment in, and it is known as the Kidnapper of the Chesapeake, from the fact that the seventeen gentlemen now before me were kidnapped by her crew.

"To aid him in his work as a Sailor Detective, Merton Granger purchased the old rookery known as the Pirates' Nest, and there, with the very excellent disguise of a snow-white wig and beard, and claiming to be an aged artist, he hunted down his foes.

"No one thought of searching his old rookery, and yet within its walls a dozen horses have been kept, a score of good men and true, and you yourselves have been well cared for as prisoners, until the last link was forged in the chain of proof that Merton Granger needed to reveal the murderers of his father and of Roderick Duval.

"Gentlemen, these guards have been his able allies, his detectives, and these two men, Leslie Dean and Nevil Dean are the murderers.

"As for myself, see what and who I am."

He raised his cowl, and the white beard

and hair of the old artist were revealed, and so cleverly were they made that no one would have doubted their being real.

Then, with considerable difficulty he removed the wig and beard, and *Merton Granger's stern, handsome face was revealed!*

As all beheld it, a cry went up from every lip, and then came deep groans from Leslie Dean and Nevil, for they felt that they were doomed.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

THE strange story told by the young sailor of his remarkable detective work, amazed all who had heard him, even to the guilty ones, who were his own blood kindred.

The judge hung his head in shame, and the lawyers were only anxious to redeem themselves in the eyes of the man they had tried so hard to hang.

As for the jury they were silent, for they had to confess to much bitterness against Merton Granger.

They had, judge, lawyers and jury suffered from imprisonment, those just kidnapped for the longest time; but they were all ready to forgive this in consideration of what Merton Granger had undergone in anguish, as an innocent man condemned by them.

They regarded the two murderers, father and son with strange feelings, for no one had once held a shadow of suspicion against either of them, while the two guilty ones sat with bowed heads and trembling forms.

"Gentlemen, I wish you to see my testimony, my proofs of what I have said.

"Mr. Vance, remove the irons from all present excepting those two men," and Merton Granger pointed to the Deans.

At the same time he unrolled a package of papers, and at a motion of his hand his guards unmasked.

"These are my detective allies, gentlemen, and here are the papers in proof of all I told you."

"God knows, Merton Granger, I wish no proof other than your word, and I forgive what I have suffered, with delight, when I feel that I have been saved from feeling that your life was upon my hands. Forgive me, Granger, for I humbly ask it," and Judge Ramsey stepped forward and stood with bended head before the Lieutenant Detective.

"Gladly, judge, and here is my hand on it. I have had my revenge upon you all in being the Kidnapper of the Chesapeake," and Merton Granger grasped the hand of Judge Ramsey.

Then up stepped the lawyers, and the jury, one by one, pleading for forgiveness, and saying frankly that Merton Granger had not really punished them enough.

"And you care not to see my proofs, gentlemen, or to hear my witnesses, of how we have unraveled this web of mystery, thread by thread?"

"No!" cried all in chorus.

"But I will give you proof, for I am guilty!" and Leslie Dean rose and faced Merton Granger.

"And I, too, am guilty, for I confess it now that all is lost.

"Yes, I confess that my father led me into crime; and more—he squandered Lucille's fortune, and kept his act a secret, and then I was to marry her and thereby we were to get the Mistletoe estates and Duval's legacy.

"See, father, I have this revenge now upon you, for you brought me to this, you forced my poor mother to be your very slave, and by threats kept her from exposing your villainy.

"See, I avenge myself, my father," and with a bitter laugh Nevil suddenly drew with his manacled hand, a small pistol from an inside pocket, and placing it to his temple ere any one could prevent, pulled the trigger.

A loud cry of anguish broke from his father's lips as he beheld this act, and he groaned rather than said:

"Yes, he has avenged himself indeed! Now let me meet my fate, Merton Granger, and the sooner the better, for I have cast all upon a die and have lost."

"Put that man in the hold, Mr. Vance, until he can be sent to the county prison," sternly ordered Merton Granger.

As Leslie Dean was led away, the Lieutenant Detective turned to those who had been his kidnapped prisoners and said:

"Gentlemen, I desire to say to you that while I was a kidnapper, I also had a Secret Service commission from the Government as a pirate-hunter, and I have been enabled to discover that Brandt the Buccaneer, who escaped at the time of the capture of his vessel, now has another craft, and is now on his way here to dig for a treasure which his father had buried on this coast long years ago.

"His father had been a pirate also, and the mother of Brandt was a captive of the Buccaneer, whose real name was Silas Blackstone.

"The son, Mr. Brandt Blackstone, proved himself worthy of his father by turning pirate, killing his parents, robbing the house, The Hermitage, and going to sea as a buccaneer.

"There was one treasure he failed to get, so it has been reported to me, and being in ill-fortune, he is coming here in his vessel to seek for it, and I ask your aid in the capture of his craft.

"Now, what say you?"

To a man they volunteered, and the schooner, now no longer a mystery to those who had so dreaded her, got up anchor and put out into the bay, running for a secret harbor.

There she remained until the next night, when a large schooner was seen running up the bay close inshore, and Merton Granger reported it to be the pirate vessel.

The anchor was gotten up and the kidnapper, as the schooner was called, ran into The Hermitage Cove, half an hour after the outlaw craft, and was laid alongside of her, surprising the pirates and making quick work of those on board.

Granger tried a little strategy then to capture the party on shore, who were coming to the rescue, by cutting his vessel loose and pretending to be beaten off.

The pirates came off in their boats, with wild cheers, were caught in the trap, and Brandt the Buccaneer and his men were cleverly captured.

The next morning Leslie Dean was landed under a guard and sent to the county jail, while the judge himself went to Valley View to acquaint poor Mrs. Dean and Lucille with all that had happened, and to tell them that Merton Granger had gone to Baltimore with his pirate prize and would then return to Mistletoe.

CHAPTER XLIX.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN the Lieutenant Detective returned to Mistletoe he was greeted by Lucille, Mrs. Herman, and his faithful slaves, foremost among the latter being old Hickory.

And Lucille had a sad story to tell, for Leslie Dean had taken his own life in prison, while his poor wife had become insane at her misfortunes, and had been sent to an asylum.

But there was some joy with the sadness, for the whole community were loud in their praise of Merton Granger, and were anxious to atone for the anguish he had suffered through the charges of guilt put upon him.

And there was one other joy, and a great one, for in Mrs. Herman, the governess, Merton Granger found his own mother, once the Gypsy queen, who had been condemned to die by her people, and yet had been spared by one whom she had befriended, and was thus allowed to be considered dead. Returning to America, she had dwelt near her son, and yet, fearful of being discovered by her people, she had never dared make herself known to him, and the locket which she wore, with a miniature likeness of her husband and baby boy, was the counterpart of one which Planter Merton had worn, only his wife's picture was in it instead of his own.

Having his father's locket and chain, Merton had, the day his mother was thrown from her horse in the glen, recognized the one worn by her, and thus in the end the mother and son, so long parted, had come together again.

In the community about Mistletoe Manor too much admiration could not be shown Merton Granger, and when, two years after, Lucille Gazzam became his wife, the wealthy

planters and the poor as well showered presents upon them as tokens of their unbounded regard.

And, kind reader, I may say, in conclusion, that never had Lucille reason to regret that her husband was once known as the Fugitive Sailor, and the Lieutenant Detective, and had won fame as the "Kidnapper of the Chesapeake."

THE END.

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